



## Courses, Conferences and Value

When we redesigned the BioUpdate Foundation website in 2011, we created this page intending to publish our own blog style entries as well as articles of interest contributed by our tutors and people within our network. The first article written for this page, was from one of the BioUpdate Foundation founders, Felix Franks. I can think of no good reason why it was never published, the full text is reproduced below and still makes for interesting reading. Apart from giving an insight into the origins of the Foundation, it addresses one of the reasons the BioUpdate Foundation exists – to make courses affordable to those who would benefit most.

Keeping our courses affordable is a combination of three elements: the Foundation itself is a not for profit organisation, the people who run the BioUpdate Foundation do so on a voluntary basis, and our Tutors receive a modest rather than a generous remuneration. We do not just seek to be affordable, we also intend our courses to be good value. Our tutors are carefully chosen, we do not, as some commercial workshops seem to do, simply phone around until we find somebody willing to take on the task.

Even so, times are hard, training budgets are being squeezed more than ever. As some of you already know, this year we have had to cancel some courses as not enough delegates signed up to make the course viable. One consequence of being not for profit is that you are also “not for loss” the working capital will not cover a large loss. We are trying new ventures to make our courses even more affordable. We have recently presented an in house version of our Heparins course – having the Foundation come in house means you can train up to 20 people for approximately the same cost as sending 3 or 4 to a commercial external course.

In 2013, we are presenting a course in the Stockholm region. Over the years we have enjoyed the benefit of many Scandinavian delegates, so this time we are taking the course to them. Costs in Sweden are higher than in our “home” base of Amersfoort but hopefully for many of our delegates this will be offset by reduced travel costs. Even so, for delegates travelling from further afield we still think the course represents good value.

The reality of today is that many economies are in difficulty, budgets are tight and many companies are not recruiting. In order to get the best out of your people you need to train them, but more than ever you need that training to be cost effective. Our courses are not affordable because they are “cheap” courses, with low quality tuition. They are affordable because we hope to be of benefit to those who need is most – those who find it most difficult to get funding. But we do not turn others away; times are hard, budgets are tight, but you can benefit from our not for profit pricing.

**Tony Auffret**  
**December 2012**



## **The BioUpdate Foundation – then, now and in future.**

(The first, and unpublished, BioUpdate Forum article. Felix Franks 2011)

A plethora of national and international scientific congresses, symposia, seminars and courses is available annually, mounted and/or sponsored by government agencies, industrial giants and scientific societies. The events cover most aspects of physical, chemical and life sciences, medicine, engineering, IP law and regulatory matters, etc. Attendee numbers vary from vast international congresses to limited “expert” seminars. More often than not, meeting venues are chosen for their beautiful surroundings or historical importance and an adequate number of Five Star hotels. Even cruise liners have been known to serve as scientific conference venues. At the other end of the spectrum, some very prestigious “by invitation only” conferences are housed in student accommodation offering maximum personal discomfort.

A favoured format of congresses is based on a series of so-called keynote lectures by well-known “Names”. Following these ‘keynote’ lectures, the programme may diversify into a series of ‘short’ presentations, usually describing original work of the presenter(s). ‘Short’ in this context may mean 15 to 20 minutes, hardly sufficient to describe complex issues, thus leading to time overruns, without time left for discussions or coffee breaks, which often are the most useful periods. A particularly counterproductive feature of large conferences is the scheduling of concurrent sessions on related topics.

Cost/benefit ratios vary, depending also on who pays and who benefits. Recent graduates benefit from large congresses by meeting older, experienced professionals and for networking, but they may find it hard to obtain the necessary finances. Mature professionals, on the other hand, are likely to have enough spending money. They enjoy meeting old friends, but they hardly benefit greatly from lectures they have heard before. They would benefit more from focussed, selected and selective symposia, directed to well-defined topics. In any case, costs can be astronomical and hardly affordable to the individual. The cost/benefit ratio depends on the views of those who have to pay the bills.

On the subject of cost/benefit, an experience comes to mind: a lecture on ‘Accountability’, delivered in 1968 by Professor Donald F. Hornig, then Science Advisor to President Johnson. Accountability was not at that time a word that figured in the Dictionary of Science. Professor Hornig told his audience that the National Association of Mathematicians (USA) had held their recent annual congress on board a cruise liner in the Caribbean. He mused that perhaps such a cruise might lead to advances in Mathematics, but it was surely up to the organisers to explain this to the rank and file membership and to the taxpayers.

A recent international symposium on the scientifically challenging and industrially important subject of seed dormancy took place in Fargo, North Dakota. Why choose Fargo? No doubt the organisers had their reasons, but accountants may question this choice of venue when estimating the cost/benefit ratio. Perhaps Faro (Portugal), a popular tourist resort, would have been a better choice. Whatever might be the intellectual benefits, costs in money and travel time can be calculated and some numbers are shown in the Table for those who are fortunate enough to live near Airline Hub cities like New York, Sydney, Tokyo, Amsterdam, Buenos Aires or Beijing. But what about those who are less fortunate? In times like the present, when funds are scarce, how many young scientists, who could have learnt much from an attendance at this meeting, were prevented by the strange choice of Fargo as a favoured venue?

Table: Cost (2009) of cheapest round trip flights to Fargo from major cities, exclusive of local taxes.

City	Airline	Fare US \$
London	KLM	1231
	Delta	1372
Amsterdam	Delta	635
Tokyo	Delta	1189
	ANA	1996
Mumbai	KLM	1440
Sydney	Delta	1845
Los Angeles	Delta or American	355
Buenos Aires	United	1472
Beijing	United	1366
	Air China	2640

The idea of a BioUpdate Foundation first arose among a small group of experienced European scientists who had been hired by a US based organisation, active in running training courses in technology and engineering subjects. It soon dawned on the tutors that the driving force of the company was profit, rather than product quality. They decided that, with their collective experience, they could do a better job by going it alone. The BioUpdate Foundation was the result. It was born in the Netherlands in 1992 as a non-profit Educational Foundation, with the aim of creating a portfolio of well defined post-experience residential courses on topical subjects, presented by well qualified tutors with specialist experience in the chosen topic, and working as a team. The Foundation was managed, and initially financed, by Drs André Schram and Felix Franks, both then occupying senior positions in either Biotech or academic organisations. The introductory course, Pharmaceutical Freeze-drying, was based on a realisation that lyo-technology was widely practised, but largely on a trial-and-error basis, without much understanding of basic principles. The course, periodically updated, has become a favourite and has been offered in several European countries at irregular intervals. Other course topics were added as time went on, and the Foundation has gathered a faithful following from European enterprises and also some from much further afield.

BioUpdate keeps costs at a reasonable level by using comfortable, rather than plush hotels, let alone cruise liners. Preferred participant numbers vary between 10 and 25, with exception of one event, a symposium on Amorphous Food and Pharmaceutical Materials, which attracted 95 delegates. BioUpdate course participants benefit from detailed course manuals, rather than the more or less scrappy collections of greatly size-reduced black-and-white PowerPoint slides, as dished out at most commercial conferences. BioUpdate tutors, working as a team, receive modest honoraria in proportion to their individual contributions and the financial surplus of the courses. They are in attendance throughout the course and can arrange opportunities for participants to discuss issues individually or in group sessions.

The Foundation has also provided in-house courses to individual companies, even including international law firms, especially tailored to meet their special requirements. Joint courses with Universities, Government Laboratories, and Scientific/Professional Societies have been another useful feature of the Foundation's activities, leading to the generation of networks in a number of fields. In general, however, the BioUpdate Foundation remains a modest organisation. Its continued existence, in the face of much commercial competition, demonstrates that "small" is not only beautiful but can also be quite effective.

