



The European Association for Geochemistry

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THE ROAD TO DAVOS – GOLDSCHMIDT 2009 CONFERENCE REPORT

With over 3100 abstracts submitted and more than 2800 registered delegates (28% students), the meeting at Davos in June 2009 was the biggest Goldschmidt Conference to date. The top ten countries in terms of delegates were the United States (578), Germany (338), the UK (265), Switzerland (232), France (223), the People's Republic of China (157), Japan (140), Australia (78), Russia (75) and Canada (69). Just over half of all delegates were from Europe. The success of a meeting cannot be and isn't judged by its size, but by the quality of the science presented and the environment for meeting colleagues and friends. As an organizer it is easy to get a distorted view of how well a meeting has worked. That is why we thank all the delegates, just under 15%, who took the time to fill in the post-conference questionnaire; they provided an essential reality check and very important feedback. With respect to overall satisfaction for the meeting, 55% judged it as good and 40% as very good. Forty percent of delegates ranked the science content as good and 60% as excellent. Goldschmidt has never had feedback in this form before. With the community's help, the organizers now have a base from which to improve meetings and to assess whether future meetings are reaching the high standard expected.

Past European meetings have been organised by a single institute or a local consortium of institutes, and without exception they have been great successes. Davos 2009 is the first Goldschmidt meeting to be organised directly by the European Association for Geochemistry (EAG). The motivation for organisation by the EAG was the increasing size of the meeting. The infrastructure and time commitment required to run an expanding Goldschmidt means that it is becoming increasingly harder to find European institutes or local consortia willing to take on and effectively subsidise future meetings. Goldschmidt is a meeting that has become so important for geochemistry that it is both unwise and unfair to have its future success or failure rest solely on one institute's shoulders. With EAG involvement in the organisational process of European Goldschmidt Conferences, an infrastructure has been created that removes the burden from local organisers and provides a stronger base for institutional memory and continuity for future meetings.

As the site of the successful 2002 Goldschmidt meeting, Davos was an obvious candidate for a return visit. The principal convenors were the organising committee chairman, Chris Ballentine; the local convenor, Judith McKenzie (ETH Zurich); and EAG vice-president/president, Eric Oelkers. The committee chairman was responsible for forming the science committee. The convenors were aided by an organising committee that included the then EAG president, Alex Halliday; EAG secretary, Susan Stipp (later Steve Banwart); and EAG treasurer, Catherine Chauvel (later Christa Gopel). The administration of the conference was run by Cambridge Publications, which also had a place on the organising committee (Paul Beattie). It was very important to form a European rather than a national core science team, and we were very pleased when Philippe Van Capellen (University of Utrecht) and Janet Hering (EAWAG) joined the science committee to complete the full Goldschmidt 2009 organising committee. The committee first met in Davos in May 2007.

From the outset we wanted to involve many top geochemists from around the world in constructing the science program. The committee identified 19 science themes and potential chairs who, along with the co-chairs of their choosing, were to put together a team to identify the key theme topics that would form the conference sessions. This inter-

national science panel was 149 strong (30% women), the largest ever. The sessions proposed initially were checked by the Goldschmidt 2009 science committee for consistency and possible overlap, and 107 approved sessions were advertised shortly before the Vancouver Goldschmidt meeting in 2008. An open call to the community brought in a further 20 sessions. From comparisons with other meetings, we predicted an attendance of 2300–2500 (Fig. 1)

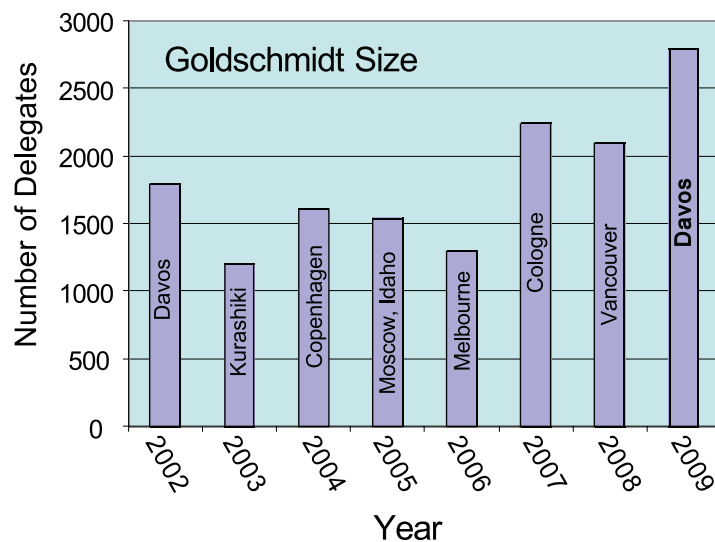


Figure 1 – Growth of Goldschmidt meetings since 2002

The Conference

By the 22 February 2009 abstract submission deadline, we had received 3099 abstracts for the meeting. We hired four extra speaker rooms in a nearby hotel and made the hard, but essential, decision to reduce congestion by running the posters in parallel with the oral sessions. Light food, lunch bags and beer throughout the afternoon, only available in the poster hall, helped bring in delegates to view the posters, which were also on display during lunch and after the oral sessions had closed in the afternoon. On Monday and Tuesday, throughout the day there were between 400 and 550 delegates continually in the poster hall. By Thursday, numbers during the day had dropped but they increased during lunch and in the evening. While most delegates would clearly have preferred oral and poster sessions not be scheduled in parallel and, even better, be held in the same building, we were nevertheless pleased to see that the overall conference satisfaction rating by the poster presenters was the same as the average.

Workshops, Field Trips and Social Events

A total of 270 delegates took part in a range of field trips before and after the conference. Three one-day trips, two three-day trips and one five-day trip were held. All field trips reached the minimum number of participants required, with the three-day trip to the Damma Glacier at capacity. The field trips were led by volunteers from institutes across Switzerland, but some leaders came from as far afield as Torino and Copenhagen. Feedback from participants was excellent, despite some adverse weather. In addition to the field trips, five workshops ran in conjunction with Goldschmidt, three on site, one in Zurich and the other in Nancy, France (with a Nancy–Davos shuttle provided). The Thermodynamics and Kinetics MSA short course was at capacity (125 delegates). The organising committee would like to echo the participants in thanking all the field trip and workshop organisers for their hard work in making these events such a success.

The well-attended Sunday icebreaker featured live music provided by Double Scotch, a band of geochemists from CRPG, Nancy, whose rock covers were particularly popular with younger delegates. The conference dinner on Wednesday was attended by 1120 people and held in Davos' Valliant Arena, the ice stadium also used for the poster displays. The catering company provided an outstanding selection of Swiss local specialities, in volumes sufficient to satisfy the hungriest. Live Brazilian jazz music and a DJ got many on their feet, resulting in a stage full of dancing bodies that only cleared when the music stopped at 1 am. Other social events were also popular, with alpine views, high dining and a sell-out glacier restaurant train attracting 370 delegates to three smaller events.



Dancing at the conference dinner takes over the stage.

Pens, Bags and Organisation

We followed the footsteps of other Goldschmidt meetings on innovations that worked well. Instead of thick paper volumes, reusable pen drives (memory sticks) containing the conference abstracts were issued, conference programmes were pocket sized and paper handouts were discouraged. With so little conference material to carry, we decided to make conference bags optional, and only 402 of a potential 2800 bags were ordered.

Cambridge Publications provided the Internet infrastructure and support office that administered the science program construction; the liaison with exhibitors; abstract submission; registration for the conference, field trips, social events and workshops; help desk; and much more. Previous Goldschmidt organisers have all praised Paul Beattie's team for the quality and good value of their product. EAG and the Goldschmidt 2009 organising committee had an equally good experience with the service, as did delegates and session chairs who returned the questionnaire.

Press and Earth's Future

As the conference grows larger, its potential for drawing attention to the importance of geochemistry grows. This year we were able to attract to an 'Earth's Future' event several key scientists who have made a significant impact in the implementation of science in policy: Sir David King, former chief scientific adviser to the UK government; 'Ram' Ramanathan, member and subcommittee chair of the IPCC; Bill Chameides, recently chief scientist of the U.S. Environmental Defence Fund; and Janet Hering, director of EAWAG, one of Europe's most prestigious environmental research institutes. On Wednesday afternoon, attendance was high for the Earth's Future event, featuring lectures followed by a panel discussion. The conference hired a professional science journalist to generate a press release package highlighting this event, as well as other high-profile lectures given at the meeting. This package was released through a media agency specialising in science. We are waiting for a report on its impact, but we have no illusions that it will take time to build up a conference presence in this area.



Sir Prof. David King, former Chief Scientific Advisor to Her Majesty's Government (UK) and Director of the Smith School of Enterprise and the Environment, University of Oxford, was one of four high-profile speakers on 'The Earth's Future' panel.

Bloggers and Student Support Staff

The future of geochemistry lies in the gifted students whom our subject can attract and retain. We have to provide a stimulating conference environment for younger scientists, and feedback from students and early-career scientists is essential. The Geochemical Society, in addition to administering the student and developing-country grants, also recruited nine scientists to provide a Goldschmidt blogger forum – a direct form of feedback guaranteed to be read by all on the organising committee as well as by a wider audience. Doing this was no small time commitment. Judging by the blogs, everyone seemed to enjoy the process and the conference (see inset) as much as the committee and others enjoyed following the blog content. In addition to the conference bloggers, 38 BSc, MSc and early-PhD Earth science students recruited from Switzerland and southern Germany formed the core of the conference support staff. The students worked diligently at the registration desk and later with the session chairpersons, and their raw energy and infectious enthusiasm lasted the entire week; Georgi Laukert, who looked after the conference photography, deserves a special mention. Our thanks to you all.

On behalf of the Goldschmidt 2009 Organising Committee,

Chris Ballentine, Chair

THE GEOCHEMICAL SOCIETY'S GOLDSCHMIDT CONFERENCE BLOG

Nine people covered the whole event giving their views and thoughts about the meeting and spreading news, information, debates and lots of nice geochemistry 'chit-chat'. If there is one useful application of blogs, it's following a conference like Goldschmidt in almost real-time. Why? Because in my opinion the bloggers were taking the essence of the event, bringing its 'spirit' to the general public, to those who could not attend it and even to the participants who contributed with talks and posters. This spirit that we transmitted was made of 'take-home messages' from participants, discussions, chats and interactions during coffee breaks, lunch or dinner-time. In other words, it is made of what we remember when we come back home after enjoying great science.

Juan Diego Rodriguez Blanco
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