



On the PESGB Annual Conference 2021

John White*

The first online PESGB Annual Conference took place on September 3-5 2021. Given its success, I am sure it won't be the last. It attracted 242 participants from 32 countries. Its platform – fashioned by our talented administrators, SAS, with input from our Conference Committee – enabled attendees to hear or read papers beforehand, to spend nearly all the conference time engaged in discussion – ie without a presentation preceding it, to message or have video meetings with fellow participants, to network in larger groups, and to participate in workshops as well as sessions to do with research in progress, committee work and special interests.

Should online conferences replace or alternate with the traditional face-to-face ones at New College Oxford? They have several advantages. For one thing, they can accommodate more participants, New College's limit being about 200.

For another, they are incomparably cheaper. This conference was priced at between £30 for full-time employed PESGB members and



as little as £5 for first-time conference attenders with one year of PESGB membership included. This compares with standard face-to-face conference fees – ignoring concessions and bursaries - now approaching £400. The low price benefits the many people across the globe who cannot afford the Oxford conference fee plus travel and other costs.

Online meetings cut out the hassles of getting to Oxford, whether by car from London or by air from USA or Japan. They suit, among others, people with health conditions that prevent them from travelling. They are also likely to generate more high-quality papers from across the world. This is because face-to-face ones can only attract contributions from those able and willing to travel to them, whereas there is no such condition attached to online conferences.

The latter also seem to be attractive to educational policymakers in search of philosophical perspectives on their work. Among attendees at the 2021 one were the Assistant General Secretary, Education policy and research, of NEU – the UK’s largest teaching union – the CEO of the Australian Council for Education Research UK, the General



Manager of a Cambodian Institute of Banking, as well as senior figures in schools and the inspectorate.

So much for the advantages. There are other considerations. Some of those who come to Oxford prize the experience of staying in an ancient college in one of the world's most famous universities, perhaps combining the conference with a short holiday. They enjoy eating in Hall and appreciate the excellent food and wine New College provides. Inseparably from this, they value meeting old and new friends face-to-face on both formal and informal occasions.

The 2021 online conference focussed on intensive intellectual interchange at a low price. It has enabled us to see conferences at New College in a new light – as accessible only to those who are well-off themselves or are generously funded. We are also better able to detach the conference's intellectual concerns from, for example, the prestigiousness of the location.

I leave unanswered how far our future conferences should be wholly, as distinct from partially, online; and whether face-to-face conferences – if they still occur and are not eclipsed by face-to-face

The logo for pesgb, consisting of the lowercase letters 'pesgb' in a white, sans-serif font, centered within a solid teal square.

meetings of other kinds – should take place in an Oxbridge college or in a site less dazzling in its celebrity and more affordable.

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