
Virtual Networking Strategy

COST Action CA18201 ConservePlants

Introduction

The past 18 months have proved extremely challenging for the COST Action CA18201 ConservePlants. Many activities were postponed to a future period with the hope of the normalization of the Covid-19 situation. Working with plants cannot be done remotely but requires presence in the field or laboratory. Many activities planned within ConservePlants were first planned to take part in the field, for example, the training school of Flower Biology & Pollination Ecology or Plant Translocations, in which participants would learn about the research techniques directly in the field. As the situation did not improve, the organisers were put into a difficult position to change the concepts of training schools mostly by organizing introductory courses that can be organized online, which will be followed by advanced courses held in the field or in the laboratory. In this regard, virtual networking activities have enabled us to continue with many activities and keep the interaction among participants of the Action. The possibility to use the virtual activities also proved beneficial for many applicants, as with online training schools we were able to host more participants than in the regular training schools organized in the field/laboratory.

Virtual networking activities will enhance the ability of CA18201 members to communicate and be innovative in their research and networking activities to improve plant conservation in Europe and worldwide. During a time when physical travel is limited, facilitating online activities such as workshops, trainings, meetings, and other innovative methods of collaboration will allow CA18201 participants to continue creating and networking. These opportunities will be especially beneficial to early career researchers, researchers from Inclusiveness Target Countries (ITC), COST Near Neighbour Countries (NNC) and International Partner Countries (IPC).

Assessment of Needs

CA18201 members were surveyed to learn about their needs regarding how virtual events can help meet the Action objectives and what barriers to participation that they experience.

23 CA18201 members responded to the [survey](#). 10 respondents reported being from ITC countries, 9 respondents reported being a PhD student or early career investigator (Figure 1), and 10 did not meet either of those criteria. 19 respondents have attended online events hosted by CA18201 during Grant Period 2 and only 3 respondents indicated they had not attended (Figure 2).

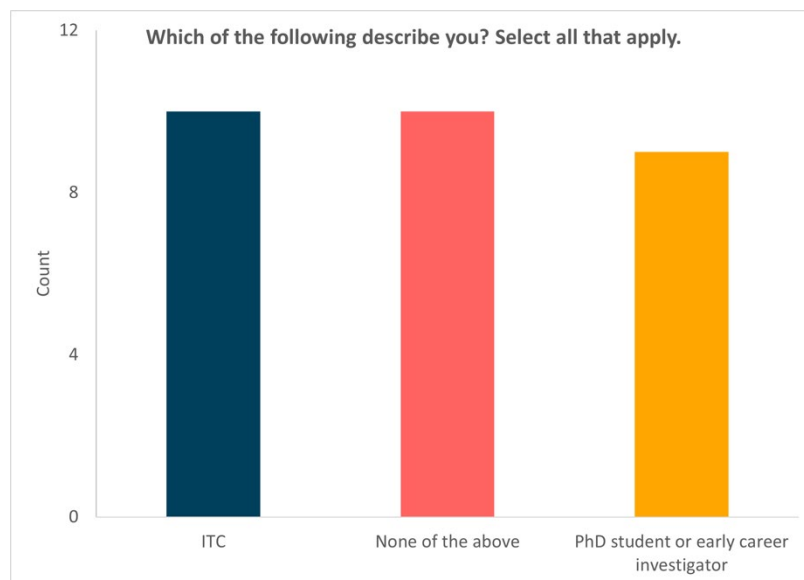


Figure 1. Responses to the survey question “Which of the following describe you? Select all that apply.”

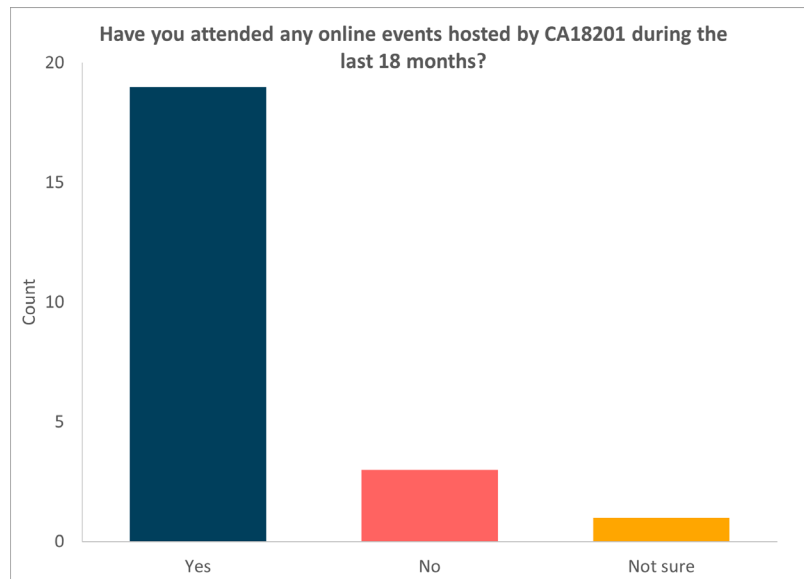


Figure 2. Responses to the survey question "Have you attended any online events hosted by CA18201 during the last 18 months?"

Most members indicated there were barriers that prevented them from participating in ConservePlants virtual activities. Only 4 members noted that there were no barriers to participation in virtual activities. Time (12) and difficulty to build relationships or networks virtually (11) were the most common barrier to participation. Slow internet (3) and incompatibility with technology (1) also hindered several members from participating in virtual activities. See Figure 3.

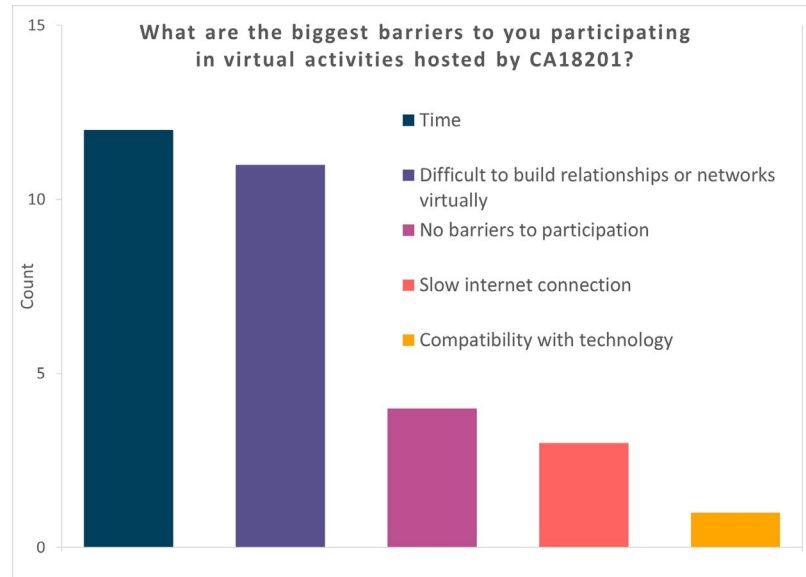


Figure 3. Responses to the survey question “What are the biggest barriers to you participating in virtual activities hosted by CA18201?”

All CA18201 Members indicated they would be interested in attending online activities hosted by ConservePlants (Figure 4). Webinars (17), video presentations of researchers and their work (14), and short tutorials about lab techniques (12) were the most popular virtual activities. 1 member indicated they would be interested in having Working Group updates and working meeting virtually.

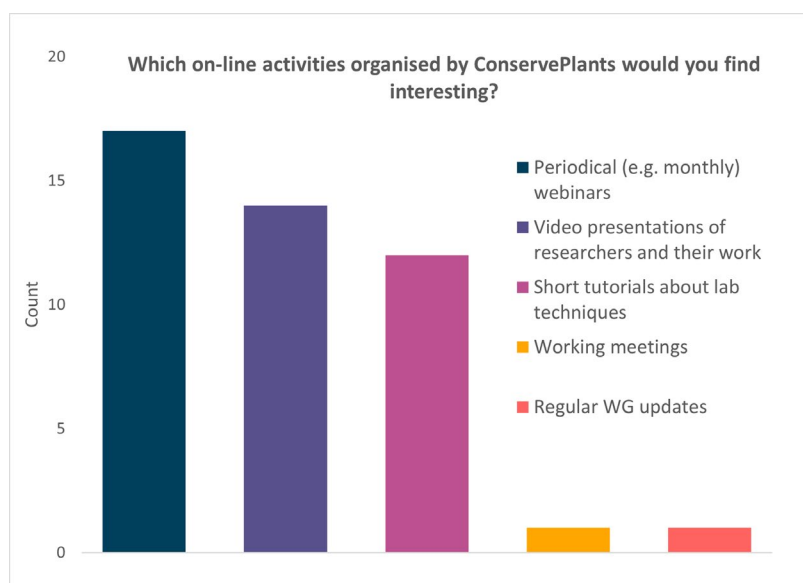


Figure 4. Responses to the survey question “Which on-line activities organised by ConservePlants would you find interesting?”

Members were asked to describe how the virtual events hosted by COST Action CA18201 ConservePlants can help in their research and networking to help meet the Action objectives and 56% of respondents provided useful feedback. They can be summarized as: 1) Travel related - saving time and climate protection; 2) Stay up to date on Action activities; 3) Network building with other researchers; 4) Share information, knowledge, and exchange ideas; and 5) Plan future research.

Members suggested online tools or platforms that would allow them to collaborate with other participants in ConservePlants more easily, such as Zoom, Teams, Google Meet, Skype and Miro (online collaborative whiteboard platform).

Several members stressed that while virtual activities are important tools for the Action, they can not fully replace the value of in-person activities. Another member noted that “Virtual Mobility Grants are great opportunities to push forward many activities of the ConservePlants



project as many members are working in the compilation of information in databases and big database analyses."

Virtual Networking Strategy

The Virtual Networking Strategy will support a variety of online activities, including normal business of the Action (i.e., WG meetings), knowledge building (i.e., webinars and presentations), and informal networking activities. The overall strategy on virtual networking for CA18201 aligns with the COST Association principles, including openness and inclusivity. It will be especially beneficial to early career researchers, researchers from Inclusiveness Target Countries (ITC), COST Near Neighbour Countries (NNC) and International Partner Countries (IPC) as it will provide virtual opportunities for collaboration, innovation and furthering their research that may be unavailable otherwise.

The input of CA18201 Members has been integrated into the Virtual Networking Strategy. With regards to limited time, it is important that virtual events have a clear purpose, which supports the objectives of CA18201, and provide a benefit to members. Additionally, opportunities for unstructured or informal discussion for networking like breakout rooms can be provided for members during events.

Additionally, feedback from some Working Groups suggests that CA18201 should aim for the continuous implementation of some regular online meetings, especially for Working Groups or task-forces within Working Groups, according to the availability of leaders and members and the present workload (e. g. 3-4 WG meetings per year seem to be the most feasible). This would allow for the better establishment and follow-up of the collaborative work needed to accomplish the objectives of the action.

The new COST Action Virtual Mobility Grant and Virtual Networking Support tools will allow additional opportunities to collaborate and help meet CA18201 objectives. The VNS manager will also encourage the inclusion of several virtual networking tools into the Work and Budget

plan for the next Grant Period (November 2021-October 2022), such as short video tutorials about lab techniques as outputs of training schools, presentations of researchers and their work as outputs of STSMs and periodical webinars.

Approach for coordinating Virtual Mobility Grants

The call for Virtual Mobility (VM) Grants was drafted with input from the Core Group. It included clear goals and selection criteria. It was shared with and voted on by the MC. Then the VM Grant Call was disseminated on the Action website, social media platforms, and mailing list. After the call closed, the Virtual Networking Support (VNS) Manager and the ITC Conference Grants committee, composed by the ITC Conference manager, co-manager and Vice-chair, reviewed VM applications. If necessary, the VNS Manager asked for additional information from the applicant to ensure the VM grant can meet the Action objectives. After discussion, they selected those that best met the objectives of the Action. The VNS Manager notified the applicant and managed the application in e-cost.

The VNS manager coordinated with the successful applicants to support the completion of the VM Grant. This includes providing support to ensure information is collected for reporting purposes and selecting the appropriate tools for the grant activities.

Coordination and reporting of online events

The VNS manager will write a final report that includes the virtual networking strategy and all the virtual events and collaboration activities organized by the Action, including VM Grants. The core group will provide input and approve the report which will then be sent to the MC for approval before submission to the COST Association. Once approved, the Virtual Networking Strategy will be available on the CA18201 website.

Additionally, the VNS manager can work with Action participants to promote virtual networking activities, such as:



- Selection of virtual tools
- Best practices for virtual event planning and implementation
- Collecting information for reporting and reimbursement purposes
- Provide support to create a useful and organized virtual event
- Provide virtual networking opportunities to are accessible to as many Action members as possible.