

Executive Summary: Conference Feedback and Event Planning Recommendations

About ITAKOM 2023

It Takes all Kinds of Minds (ITAKOM) was a hybrid, interdisciplinary conference on neurodiversity. It took place at the Edinburgh International Conference Centre (EICC) over two days in March 2023, with **over 50 speakers and approximately 1,000 attendees** (approximately 80% in person, 20% virtual). The programme included a wide range of neurodiversity-related research, professional content, and lived experience talks. There were four main themes: healthcare, education, workplace and community—trying to provide “something for everyone”! ITAKOM proactively sought to attract delegates from, a wide range of disciplines, roles, and communities, and **offered discounts and bursary places** to expand access.

ITAKOM was hosted by the [Salvesen Mindroom Centre charity \(SMC\)](#) and co-chaired by **Sophie Dow**, a founder of SMC, and **Professor Sue Fletcher-Watson** of the University of Edinburgh. A neurodivergent advisory committee (the Neurodiversity Squad) further supported and guided the chairs. The members of the Neurodiversity Squad were: **Bethan Davies, Karen Leneh Buckle (Leneh), Nancy Doyle, Natalia Zdorovtsova, Rebs Curtis-Moss, and Tumi Sotire**. Other members of the SMC leadership team and SMC trustees led on finance, sponsorships, and driving conference attendance (in partnership with Integrity Events). Additional support for communications and digital content was generously contributed by Maclean Creative, Four Marketing and PR Agency, and Fusion Medical Animation. The **official conference photographer** was [Jess Shurte](#). Her pictures appear throughout the [ITAKOM legacy website](#) and the conference reporting.



Headline findings from the feedback survey

About one fifth of ITAKOM attendees completed the post-conference **online feedback survey** (218 people), with a broadly similar breakdown of in-person and virtual attendees to the conference as a whole. The survey had many spaces to write in additional comments, and we received over **16,000** words of feedback—thank you, everyone! *Our full report provides more detail of feedback and recommendations.*

In asking survey respondents to indicate their professional roles (choosing one from a list of options) the most important finding was the large number of people who chose “other” and wrote to explain their *multiple* roles and connections to neurodiversity. As one person wrote *“I’m four of the above, and more than one was relevant to my attendance.”* Another pointed out *“It’s not like I just stop being neurodivergent if I attend to present a talk.”* It may be not only misleading but actively othering to force people to choose a single identity (and exclude others). Clearly, there is an opportunity here for ITAKOM and other events to do better in the future, with whether and how we ask attendees and contributors to label themselves. Acknowledging the complexity is important. For this reason, the data on survey respondents’ roles is *known* to be unreliable, and data largely was not analysed by role.

Overall, ITAKOM received strongly positive feedback across a very diverse group of presenters and attendees, which is a major achievement for the entire organising team and the venue. Even where people offered criticism of ITAKOM’s content and/or organisation, most of them also indicated that they found value and utility in the conference. Often they went further, talking about joy, celebration, positive change,

and feeling part of something bigger. Some talked specifically about the conference as positively changing their views of neurodiversity, and leading to intended changes in their work.

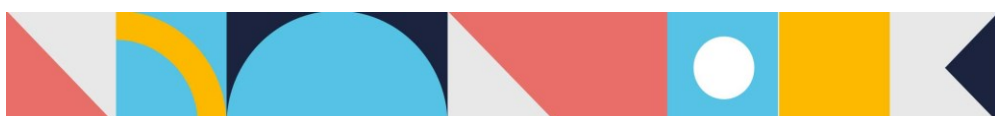
94% of attendees rated the variety of topics at the conference as “good” or “excellent”, but qualitative feedback suggested that this isn’t the whole picture. **ITAKOM’s diverse audience arrived with a wide range of sometimes-conflicting expectations for the event and the conference experience.** Thus, they had a huge range of opinions about how well ITAKOM balanced research and lived experience content, whether the presenters were sufficiently diverse, and how rigorous and relevant the content was. For example, multiple people cited a perceived over-focus on autism and autistic speakers, versus other types of neurodivergence. “More ADHD” was the single biggest request for future content. Similarly, people volunteered opposing views about how well ITAKOM succeeded on inclusion and accessibility measures, from exemplary to highly disappointing. Unfortunately, people’s comments, especially about accessibility and inclusiveness, frequently lacked actionable specifics about what was wrong, or what they needed



instead. This makes it difficult to improve in the future, and highlights the importance of specifically asking for feedback about accessibility and inclusion, which the current survey did not. One actionable piece of feedback was that many accessibility measures, such as the use of colour-coded interaction badges, need a “critical mass” of awareness and uptake before they are useful. ITAKOM had that critical mass with silent “flapplause”, but not with interaction badges—a goal for next time.

One of the biggest divisions in **expectations was around “acceptable” neurodiversity language and viewpoints at ITAKOM.** Per their feedback, many people seemed satisfied or neutral about hearing a variety of viewpoints and terminology during the conference. However, a vocal subgroup of attendees clearly expected the organisers to be active referees of speakers and exhibitors, and were dissatisfied they weren’t publicly “calling out” unacceptable views and content. In some cases, they expressed an understanding that organisers had already seen, and should be able to approve or control, all the presented content (which was not the case). In the opposite corner, a smaller number of attendees spoke up to express concern that ITAKOM (both officially and via pressure from other attendees) set a “relentlessly positive” tone, and made it *unsafe* to have certain views or conversations. It’s unclear how far this concern was shared—people who already felt “attacked” at the event may have been reluctant to feed this back to the organisers or judged it pointless. This split highlights a critical area where future organisers need to proactively plan their approach and **manage attendees’ expectations**, especially where a range of views and language will be present. It is discussed in more detail in full feedback report.

Scheduling was a major feedback area. Overall, the variety of session formats (multiple lengths of talks, workshops, panels, posters) was seen as a positive. However, the scale of the conference, many fast transitions around the building, and long, jam-packed days were hard on many attendees. This feedback came strongly—but not only!—from neurodivergent attendees. Across the feedback survey, there was a clear message that **a conference could do less in the future and still be valuable**: shorter days, fewer concurrent sessions and choices, and allowing “breaks with nothing” rather than double-scheduling meals



with posters and activities. They also wanted *more* time for transitions, Q&A, and networking. People really valued the opportunities to connect and discuss with others as a key part of the event.

Due to its **hybrid model**, ITAKOM was livestreaming most content to virtual attendees, and had this immediately available on “catch-up” for all registered attendees. People embraced this option for its flexibility and opportunity to see sessions they missed, and thought it added value to their registration. Unfortunately, technical problems on the morning of both days were stressful for many virtual attendees, and detracted from their experience. This underscores how essential reliability and fast, clear communication are for a smooth hybrid event. Interactivity and networking for virtual attendees could also be better facilitated in the future, especially for virtual presenters.

Overall, the choice to host ITAKOM at EICC seem to have worked for a majority of the attendees, with many people praising the location and the range of spaces within the building. There were points for improvement around too-bright lighting, noise levels, and insufficient seating/eating areas. Feedback about the venue staff and volunteers was particularly positive. One factor in this may have been a **pre-event briefing** (10-min video) about the diverse audience expected for ITAKOM, planned inclusion measures, and tips for respectful and constructive interaction.

Finally, **food** received more comments than almost anything else. ITAKOM’s choice to serve hot, vegetarian meals was very polarising. Many loved it and found it a pleasant change from sandwiches, but others found it totally inaccessible and left to buy their own food. Many neurodivergent people have strong sensory needs around food, and may need specific “safe”, plain, or bland foods. The strong smells/flavours and mixed textures of ITAKOM meals were the opposite. Sandwiches may have been a better choice after all!

“What would you like to see the ITAKOM organisers do next?”

When asked, the most popular option (with 75% in favour) was to **hold another ITAKOM-like conference** in several years’ time. Other popular options included a **monthly newsletter** (66.97% agreed) and **smaller themed online events** (67.89% agreed). Smaller in-person annual events had moderate support. Multiple people specifically explained their interest in less tiring and more manageable future events, after experiencing ITAKOM. Other suggested future actions included:

- Online networking and/or discussion around conference topics (the most popular suggestion),
- Monthly webinars or other online content like lived experience blogs/vlogs
- Directory of neurodivergent professionals and/or researchers
- Opportunities focused specifically on early-career researchers (such as training elements in a future event).

It may be that *having* future events that build on ITAKOM is the most important thing, rather than their exact format. As one attendee wrote,

“there is a clear need for more gatherings of neurodivergent people, academics and practitioners in order to share learning and inspire fulfilling lives.”



Organising future events: What are the big lessons from ITAKOM?

This section reports a mixture of highlighting what went well, direct requests and suggestions from attendees, and reflection on the pattern of feedback across our attendees.

Successful planning choices at ITAKOM

- **Combining lived experience, professional practice, and research in the programme**, though future events could do more to represent even wider ‘diversity within neurodiversity’ and avoid over-focusing on some issues or types of lived experience over others.
- **Hybrid event model with recorded ‘catch-up’ content**: supported access, offered flexibility, and also added value for in-person attendees (opportunity to see more of a busy event). *However, improving networking/interactivity for virtual attendees was less successful, needs further work.*
- **Discounts and fully-funded bursary places** enabled attendance for people who might not otherwise have attended, and were highly valued by recipients. Offer these if you can.
- **Providing detailed pre-event information about transportation methods and costs, the venue, and how to get help at different times/through different channels.**
- **Briefing venue/front-facing staff (e.g. reception, security, food service) about diverse attendee group** appears to have contributed to positive on-the-day experiences for many (though not all)

Big-picture: What type of event are you organising, and what is the organisers’ remit?

As noted here and explored in detail in the full report, delegates’ feedback revealed different ideas about **what type of event ITAKOM was, and what the organisers did (or should have done)**. In a nutshell, there was a tension between seeing the event primarily as a forum for ideas and discussion, versus as designed to promote specific ideas (and thus as an event acting to *exclude* other ideas and types of language). Some attendees’ feedback indicated significant dissatisfaction over content they thought was unacceptable or irrelevant. Some of this tension about ITAKOM’s nature may be related to the breadth of its content and audiences. **In trying to offer something for all, ITAKOM did not consistently promote a clear and unified and message about what the event aimed to accomplish**—a clear place where future organisers could improve. Different audiences (understandably) arrived with different expectations, only some of which were met. Trying to offer “something for everyone” carries risks. More focus in terms of topics and audiences may make it easier for organisers to understand and meet their attendees’ expectations and access needs (and also reduce event length and intensity, see below).

Especially if you plan to target a mixture of audiences (neurodivergent adults, practitioners, academics, policy etc), we strongly encourage organisers to discuss the following early and often:

- What type of event is this? Is it more like an open forum, or are we promoting specific ideas, or even trying to create a particular type of experience/community/space? How do we explain this?
- What is our main message about what the event is for, who it is for, and any specific goals?
- Given our event type, what is our role as organisers (and how can we communicate its limits)?
- Are there views, language, types of research (etc) that **are not acceptable** at the event? How can we (can we?) implement that ideal policy in practice? *Be specific*. References to terms like positive, accepting, or affirming are helpful for an event’s overall vision—but are not actionable instructions.
- What should attendees expect from this event, and how can we communicate this, both for those with previous conference experience and those without?

We also strongly encourage organisers to make their key messages and any “rules” available as explicitly and early as possible (inviting speakers, call for submissions), along with the reasoning for the guidance. People should be able to make informed decisions about whether this event will be useful and acceptable to them. *Event purpose and organiser roles was a complex feedback area, and the full report unpacks it in some detail and makes multiple recommendations—we encourage you to read more if this issue interests you. We have only highlighted a few discussion points here.*



For other events with mixed audiences, consider organising something with a narrower focus and less-dense schedule than ITAKOM (or than a typical academic conference). Feedback suggests an appetite for smaller and more focused events, online or in person.

- Adding “more” to your event (topics, concurrent tracks, sessions in day, evening socials) has impacts on your attendees *and these might be negative*. Think carefully if potential extra value outweighs the extra demands, and for whom.
- Long, densely-scheduled events may disproportionately disadvantage certain groups of attendees, including neurodivergent people, those with disabilities/chronic illnesses, or carers.

Top tips about event practicalities

- **Do not force people to “choose one” when stating their professional interests, roles, or connections to neurodiversity (e.g. registration and feedback forms).** Allow multiple choices, or self-definition where practicable.
- **Schedule “breaks with nothing”** to allow all attendees to genuinely recover, eat their food, and/or engage in networking (e.g. not scheduling posters, training, or committee meetings over lunch).
- **If at all possible, avoid scheduling multiple simultaneous activities in the same space (e.g. lunch + posters).** This can be inaccessible to many, especially re: sensory aspects.
- **Consider lighting** as a critical sensory element and accessibility issue—it’s not only about noise.
- **Many inclusion measures need a critical mass of participation to be effective**, like interaction badges. Consider how to go beyond “making things available” and actively encourage *uptake*.
- **Food is an access issue and really matters to attendees’ event experience.** Make sure to consider the *sensory* aspects of food options in addition to allergies and other requirements.
- **Make clear contingency plans for uncommon but *possible* disruptive events, e.g. a fire alarm/building evacuation, or power outage.** How will you support attendees during *and after*?

About this executive summary and where to find more

The full ITAKOM 2023 **conference feedback report** with more numbers, quotes, and detailed recommendations is available for download from our **legacy website** (<https://salvesen-research.ed.ac.uk/itakom-conference-2023>). This website also includes copies of the conference programme, example materials produced for ITAKOM, and links to presentation videos.

Author: Dr Alyssa M. Alcorn, a researcher and invited speaker at ITAKOM who was not involved conference organising or reviewing.

Need to contact us? E-mail salvesenresearch@ed.ac.uk and we will direct your query. *We have a small team. Thank you in advance for your patience.*

