

REFLECTIONS ON INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES

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The first International Conference of the Society that I attended was the 7th in Mexico City in 1969. At that time, I was a young academic, and was awed to be in the presence of such luminaries of Soil Mechanics as Skempton, Peck, Bjerrum and Seed, among many others. At that time, the format of the conference consisted largely of Plenary Sessions in which State of the Art Lectures were presented by the leading lights of the profession. No individual presentations were made of “ordinary” papers submitted to the conference, but these were summarized by General Reporters in the Plenary Sessions dealing with specific technical topics. There was also an opportunity for written discussion to be made subsequently on submitted papers, including rebuttals by authors to comments made on their paper by the General Reporter. The State of the Art Lectures were highly influential at that time, and I particularly remember Peck’s lecture on excavations and tunnelling, a classic paper that is still referred to frequently. Another feature of the Mexico City Conference was the holding of a series of Specialty Sessions in which papers were presented and published in separate volumes. An important volume dealt with Soil Dynamics and included papers by Ohsaki, Seed, McNeill, and Broms and Forsblad, together with a number of discussions and a summary of research activities in soil dynamics and earthquake engineering. In my subsequent career, both in academia and practice, much of the published material from this conference formed the basis of my understanding of various facets of soil dynamics, and also the basis of several lectures that I gave to undergraduate and graduate classes.

Since that pivotal conference, I have been privileged to attend all the subsequent conferences, with the exception of the 2017 event in Seoul. The format of the conferences tended to be similar for many of the succeeding conferences, and during the 1977 Tokyo Conference, a further series of Specialty Sessions was published, dealing with the effects of horizontal loads on piles, soil sampling, and constitutive equations for soils. Again, these volumes, together with the State of the Art papers, provided valuable information for both academics and practitioners.

In more recent conferences, the format has tended to change, and there is now the facility for authors of submitted papers to give a presentation. This has coincided with the development of Technical Committees of The Society, and has resulted in a plethora of parallel sessions and the need for participants to choose typically between 5 or 6 parallel sessions to attend. The concept of a General Reporter summarizing the papers within a specific technical area seems to have been put aside, and as a consequence, there is no longer any critique or discussion of any of the submitted papers.

As I reflect on the changed format of the International Conference, I realize that the outlets for publishing technical papers tended to be very limited until well into the 1970’s, so that one of the fruitful venues for publishing papers was the quadrennial International Conference. Now, with a plethora of geotechnical journals, both print and electronic, the role of the International Conference has changed from being a venue for technical publication and transmission of information, to being more the means of inter-personal contact (and also of international travel to interesting destinations). While this serves a useful purpose, I cannot help but think that we have lost a valuable opportunity for the profession to be brought up-to-date on the latest developments via broadly focused State of the Art Lectures, and for critical review of the papers submitted to the conference. In particular, we seem to be missing an opportunity to bridge the gap between research and practice by critically appraising the practical utility of the submitted papers.

There are many, many conferences these days that address specific topics and allow individual presentations of papers by authors. That is fine, and it may not be feasible, nor necessary, to reduce the number of such conferences. However, I would like to suggest that the aim of the International Conference should be different from these more conventional conferences, by putting a greater emphasis on providing relevant information for the geotechnical community at large, and critically appraising the relevance of research-focussed submitted papers to practice, rather than serving mainly the attendees at the conference. My view is that our geotechnical community could benefit from International Conferences that include the following characteristics:

1. A limited number of State of the Art Lectures, in which a broad review is made of developments since the previous State of the Art lecture was delivered. These should include areas in which recent research has changed, or has the potential to change, the practice of geotechnical engineering.
2. The Honours Lectures that were instituted over the past decade should also be presented at Plenary Sessions. These provide a more focused and personal viewpoint of the topic being addressed than the State of the Art Lectures.
3. General reports on submitted papers in specific technical areas, probably aligned to those of the Technical Committees of the Society. The authors should have the ability to respond in writing to the General Reporter if they feel that the comments require rebuttal or the inclusion of additional information.
4. A selection of (say) five outstanding submitted papers to be presented orally by the authors.

The preparation of a suitable State of the Art lecture is a very time-intensive activity, and it would not be inappropriate for the lecturer to receive some financial compensation from The Society for his/her efforts. The same principle could also apply to General Reporters, who may well have to read and critically appraise dozens of papers, and document their views. I would see this as an investment by the Society for the benefit of their members, rather than a cost.

The above suggestions also imply that there is a greater focus on Plenary Sessions and a reduction in parallel sessions. I recognize that I am in danger of regression to the past, but nevertheless, I feel very strongly that our International Conferences, like those of other professions such as medicine, should be a focal point for both academics and practitioners to be brought up to date, and to meet and facilitate the narrowing of the gap between research and practice. This in turn implies that we provide more opportunities to gather together as a single group, rather than as a series of fragmentary groups. I hope that, for future conferences, at least some consideration may be given to critically reviewing the present conference format and assessing the benefits of making changes such as those suggested above.