

Learning Report

Bringing together a record number of 1,400+ clinical psychologists, psychiatrists and researchers from all over the world, the ADAA 2019 conference in Chicago created an atmosphere for me to share, network and learn about the cutting-edge research conducted with the aim of deciphering and treating anxiety and depression. Whilst organizing and executing the conference, the ADAA also introduced sponsor booths which include unique charities and businesses that financially support mental health clinics. Within this enriching environment, and as the only undergraduate student, I had the privilege to present my poster titled 'Can attentional training diminish fear generalization to prevent the emergence of anxiety problems and reduce anxiety symptoms?'. The conference offered more than 50 seminars, networking sessions and poster presentations. The four days of unparalleled educational content left me enthused and better able to collate research and come up with new research ideas and plans by simply chatting with other academics.

The ADAA 2019 conference aimed to inspire psychologists to make changes to current treatment methods by highlighting and bridging gaps in knowledge. Thus, they organized seminars which encouraged chosen lecturers to share their research investigating the psychosocial, cognitive and biological levels of depression and anxiety disorders, ultimately addressing the aetiology and maintenance of such disorders. The academics presenting at the seminars illustrated how to integrate the new findings of their research with the current knowledge and interventions, optimizing the effect of treatments. Interestingly, some of the seminars also aimed at addressing issues related to cultural, racial and socioeconomic diversity. These academics highlighted how such disparities can lead to differences in treatment responses as well as disorder manifestation. Hence, they proposed creative ways of tackling these disparities and improve the recipient's response to treatments.

A sincere networking opportunity provided by ADAA 2019 was a dinner hosted by important people in different fields, fulfilling their aim of the networking sessions which was to introduce attendees to successful professionals who were at a higher level of authority comparably. All attendees were given the opportunity to read about each dinner host and sign up for a dinner. This topic segregated dinner allowed researchers to find people with the same interests, sprouting more opportunities for knowledge exchange and collaboration. I joined the 'Genetics and Neuroscience Special Interest Group' which helped me gain insight on how to develop a career in this field. During this dinner, I was informed on some of the difficulties in this field which included the fact that there were too few specialists here and that it is difficult to find professionals who had interests in broad topics. I also had the opportunity to hear the stories of research experts in terms of life obstacles (such as marriage and kids), difficult decisions needed to be made, and how they climbed up the ladder to reach their current position. The researchers I met were supportive of my cultural beliefs regarding marriage and they tried to advise me on how to approach my career accordingly.

In one of the network coffee breaks, my laboratory director introduced me to an assistant professor who would be joining HKU in the next academic year and this was my highlight from the whole conference. Instantly, the assistant professor and I clicked, and we ended up going to similar seminars. This allowed her and I to exchange contacts and discuss topics that interested us. She inspired me with new knowledge and suggested some books and articles I should read relevant to the topics we were both interested in. By the end of the four-day conference, she offered me a placement in her laboratory for the next academic year in the position of

laboratory manager and research assistant. We discussed potential research projects and video called each other on Skype to confirm my placement as well as confirm the designs of the two research projects and potential publications. The ADAA 2019 conference was therefore not only fruitful in terms of the incredible abundance of knowledge obtained but also fruitful due to the network opportunities which landed me a fantastic job for the next academic year as only an undergraduate.

Moving on to the poster presentations sessions, ADAA 2019 aimed to allow researchers to present their posters (grouped by topics) in one room and allow other researchers to have one-to-one conversations and discussions regarding the research conducted. While presenting my poster, several professors, psychologists and researchers came to me to talk about my study. I felt proud while reflecting and talking about my work that I conducted independently, sharing details of my study as well as tips on how to analyze the data I collected. The follow-up questions allowed me to think about my study in different manners and depths.

I would like to highlight the importance of the fund's financial backing which was a key reason why I could attend this conference which researchers from all over the world attend and participate in knowledge exchange in different topics. I was able to gain an abundant amount of knowledge, find new collaboration and job opportunities, network, see how research is practically and theoretically applied as well as obtain resources to learn new skills. I look forward to future conferences to keep up to date with the current and cutting-edge research which will help me gain more research ideas and opportunities. Other than developing my academic skills, the conference has served as a platform where I have acquired and fine-tuned my non-academic skills as well.

