Travel report from the Universitas 21 Undergraduate Research Conference
Peoples and Places, held in Auckland, New Zealand, 6-10 July 2015

ERIK ANDERSSON | LUND UNIVERSITY, SWEDEN
DIARY FROM THE CONFERENCE

Monday 6 July
Kia ora! After two days of acclimatisation to literally being on the other side of the earth, I met the other conference participants in the early Monday afternoon. The place for the welcoming was Copthorne Hotel in the very centre of Auckland, where all non-New Zealand participants were accommodated. The students were already very active and excited for the week to come – a great atmosphere! One of the leading organisers, Ross Crosson, welcomed us in Maori – Haere mai – and then in English. We soon learnt that this would be the official way to greet people all through the week – a sign of respect for the first inhabitants of New Zealand. We were divided into groups of 15 people and got a guided tour around the university campus, which was only a five minute walk from the hotel. The organisers and the guiding students from the University of Auckland were all well prepared, and they were also very positive and easy to talk to.

We gathered in the Business School’s bright and spacy entrance for mingle and breaking the ice. The students were given tasks to solve while walking around the campus area, in groups of five. Meanwhile, I met the other staff representatives to discuss the forthcoming evaluation of the students’ oral presentations and posters. From Usha Bhatia, one of the organisers, we were given well thought-of criteria for the evaluation-to-come.

In the evening there was a welcome reception at the Gus Fisher Gallery with the University of Auckland’s deputy vice-chancellor Jenny Dixon. She talked briefly about the strategic and international work at the university, and especially about the pleasure of being a part of the Universitas 21 network. A person of Maori origin welcomed us with a speech in Maori and a song that we all sung together. It was a powerful moment. The night ended with networking and mingle, where I talked to several students from Asia and with the organisers, among them Libby Passau and Ross Crosson. It was a great ending of a great day!

Tuesday 7 July
Also this day we first met at the reception of the Copthorne Hotel, for a walk to the Faculty of Engineering. This was going to be the main place for the conference for the rest of the week. All students’ posters were already placed on the walls. It was a huge variation in scope, messages sent and visual expression. During the conference, about half of the students had poster presentations and half of them made oral presentations.

After a short introduction by Brett Berquist, the new Director International at the University of Auckland, the first keynote speech was held by Richard Faull, professor of anatomy and director of the Centre for brain research, also at the University of Auckland. It was an excellent choice to have him as a first speaker – he had a vast experience in the subject and at the same time he was engaging, outreaching and genuinely interested in the students’ opinions. Professor Faull gave

Guided tour in the University of Auckland campus area. To the left in the background a traditional Maori welcoming house – Waipapa Marae – the place for the Powhiri 9 July.
examples on how stimulating environments and physical activity can aid neurogenesis, i.e. the fact that the brain can repair itself, which could lead the way for the future treatment of neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer’s or Parkinson’s disease. I can tell not many students had experiences in the area but nevertheless they were not afraid about asking questions about it. For me as staff representative this was very positive, since this “broke the ice” not only between the students but also in plenum with all people attending, within a research setting. This was repeated all through the week: not a single time there was any “asking help” needed from the staff. The students were very active and many times the organisers had to stop the discussions in order to proceed to the next speaker, be it an invited keynote or a student.

10.20: Morning tea! This day and all through the week the tea and coffee was served with a nice selection of treats. This was yet another detail that made this a conference such a pleasant experience. The tea break this morning also marked the start for the first poster session. Four students got ten minutes each to present their work out in the bright lobby outside the lecture hall. The presentations were well received! Actually it was hard to find a space around the posters as the students gathered around the presenters. For me this was a pleasant surprise, i.e. to see and feel the students’ engagement in each other’s work.

After the poster session there was time for the first oral presentations. This was also the start for my own main activity during the week – to evaluate the students’ performance. We, as staff representatives, had to judge the quality of the oral presentations, the quality and use of visual aids, the factual content and structure, and last but not least the response to questions. And I must say that with a few exceptions the quality of the presentations were very high. Lunch was served in a spacy area one floor down. One hour was allocated for this, and that was really needed since there were so many spontaneous conversations taking place.

During the rest of the day there was a mix of oral presentations and poster sessions. It was also during this second day of the conference that we experienced the most outstanding oral presentation. The talk about the impact of environmental microbes on the mammalian gut microbiota by Nishat Tasnim from University of British Columbia was interesting, professional and charmed us all. It was a pure joy to listen to her, and with a big smile on my face I gave the presentation top scores in all categories.

Wednesday 8 July
We spent the whole third day of the conference at the Goldie Vineyard at Waiheke Island, a 45 min boat trip from Auckland ferry terminal. After an initial morning shower in Auckland the weather turned out to be sunny and warm (around 12 degrees) for most of the day. As we left the ferry terminal, the rainbow over Auckland called for many selfies! Once on the island, we were blown away by the marvellous setting and surroundings. Interestingly enough, the vineyard was actually owned by the university. It was not a big estate, but still they produced a few types of red and white wines. Before the presentations started we got a nice guided tour around the vineyard by the manager and winemaker Heinrich Storm. He was very well...
prepared and could easily talk to the students, tell a joke and answer their questions. It was almost a pity that we had to go inside, but we had to since there were many interesting talks to listen to also today.

One of the student presentations was a bit controversial, as compared to the other ones. The study was about the relationship between democracy and sustainable development, and the firm conclusion that a non-democratic state was better for the environment as compared to a democratic one called for a lot of comments. But the discussions never went out of control, and I was once again impressed by the students’ professional behaviour and attitude. After the student presentations professor Martin Luck talked about research publication, especially aimed at the students. It was a very positive and encouraging speech, and I hope several of the students considered professor Luck’s advice to try to publish their work.

During today’s tea breaks and lunch I talked quite a lot with the other staff representatives, and their view of the conference. We agreed upon experiencing a very positive atmosphere, mainly due to the students’ genuine curiosity and the friendly attitude and solid framework set by the organising staff.

**Thursday 9 July**

Today’s keynotes dealt with the Pacific Ocean and its people but from different viewpoints. Professor Mike Walker from School of Biological Sciences gave us an introduction to how previous civilisations were able to navigate across the ocean, and how the Polynesians (and later on Europeans) were able to colonise New Zealand. Dr Caroline Vercoe’s speech had a totally different angle. Being a researchers at the School of Humanities, her focus was on art. She gave interesting examples on how New Zealand artists who originally grew up on the pacific islands have used their art as a protest against their situation in society, but also as a way to describe their origin and their connection to the Pacific Ocean.

The student presentations continued also today, and some of them were really excellent. Late in the afternoon we had the official photo session, which we went through twice because a few students had misunderstood the schedule.

![Lively discussions during an oral presentation at Waiheke Island.](image)

![Inside the Waipapa Marae welcoming house.](image)

The day was concluded by the Powhiri – the official Maori welcoming ceremony – at the traditional Waipapa Marae house within the campus area. It was a very special moment which everyone took seriously. When the Maori elderly man greeted us in his own language and sang their songs I could feel and breathe their history in the air. It was a powerful and almost sacred moment. The student representative was Justin Fisch from McGill University, Canada. He was an excellent choice as a spokesperson (according to Maori tradition it has to be a man), earlier selected by the female students. When all students and staff had sung our welcome song – “You got a friend in me” from the movie “Toy story” – we made the traditional Maori greeting, forehead to forehead, nose to nose, with the Maori representatives and the organising staff. We also got a much appreciated and less formal introduction in English to the marvellous wood carvings in the building, by the elderly Maori woman. The evening ended with light food being served in a nice and spacy building nearby. This was the final part of our official welcoming to New Zealand.
Friday 10 July
The last day of the conference started with a keynote by Dr Chellie Spiller from the University of Auckland Business School. She talked about “A wayfinders guide to research”. It was an eye-opener to hear about the ancient Maori people’s sensitive view of standing still while the environment is moving around. According to Dr Spiller, the Maori people were not considering moving themselves when travelling across the Pacific. On the contrary their inner compass and careful observations told them it was the islands that came towards them. The second and last keynote by Associate Professor Nicholas Rowe was yet another exciting choice of talks given to us. His speech focused on people’s tactile and aesthetic relationships with each other and their environments, within the frame of the project 5cities5senses carried out in Italy, Palestine, Laos, Australia and Fiji. Nicholas enlightened us how the act of dance – amongst many things – can allow us to have a relationship with people not relying on text or spoken words – a revelation for himself when growing up and a gentle reminder to all of us about an “alternative reality” and research field where the desire is to evoke and not necessarily to measure. After the thoughtful keynotes there were a handful of student presentations left, both posters and oral presentations. They were all very good and once again they called for many questions.

In the afternoon all participants took the bus for a field trip to Te Uru Waitakere contemporary art gallery and the Piha beach by the gorgeous west coast outside Auckland. What an excellent way of ending the day-time programme: cultural inspiration with excellent artwork followed by physical activity – walks along the black sand beach, rock climbing and an overload of fresh air.

The conference officially ended with the conference dinner at the Maritime Room in the harbour of Auckland. There were not many talks this evening, but one guest speaker, the young Jade Leung, made a thoughtful, serious, yet hopeful speech for the students about them being the “superheroes” we need to act upon the world’s big challenges. It crossed my mind that she was totally right: The conference should not end here. Now when everyone knew each other it should be the perfect time to start the brain-storming and workshop activities for yet another week. The dinner ended with a prize ceremony for the best poster and best oral presentation, with well-deserved winners.

COMMENTS AND REFLECTIONS
The best conference
For me the U21 conference “Peoples and Places” was the best conference I have ever attended, both content-wise and from an organisational point of view. Quite a few colleagues of mine were sceptic about a conference with such an impossibly broad scope as “Peoples and places”. And I also had my doubts. But I’m very happy we were proven wrong.

Excellent organisation
It’s evident from the diary above that the organisation of the conference was excellent. As a participant we got information about the conference well in advance before leaving for New Zealand. It was easy to have direct contact with the organisers through e-mail if we had any issues. For example: Initially when trying to registrate, I could not go further in the online form since I would not stay in the appointed conference hotel. After highlighting this they quickly changed the form so there was an option also for me. It’s a small detail but it shows their willingness to do their very best to comply with our wishes. Other examples that made the organisation excellent:
• Very friendly organising staff that were easy to approach: from the start they set the standards and the “tone” for the conference
• Helpful and positive guiding students
• Accompanied walks from hotel to conference venue
• Usable and relevant give-aways: a backpack with a pen and a raincoat – all you need!
• Full colour printed programme with beautiful pictures and a professional layout and feel: with official greeting from the vice-chancellor, programme overview, detailed programme, abstracts, information about Universitas 21, Auckland and the host university, maps and practical information
• Well thought of planning for the staff representatives: we knew our main task to evaluate the students’ performance and to be available for support – for any student, not only “our” students from our own universities
• Number of students attending: Since there was about 50 students attending, there was a critical mass for having a variety of relevant topics and good discussions, and still being not too many – there was a chance of getting to know everyone
• Good balance between oral presentations and poster sessions
• A lot of time for networking and discussions
• Excellent (and maybe too much?) food
• Optional evening activity (movie and pizza night)
• Site visits outside the city: the Waiheke Island, Te Uru Waitakere art gallery and Piha beach

Most rewarding: discussions with the students
The most rewarding with the week was to hear the students’ views and opinions and discuss with them. It was a privilege and pure joy to be “immersed” in this atmosphere of talented, young minds for a whole week.

Advice for future students
A few advice for future students attending Universitas 21 Undergraduate Research Conferences would be to be curious and enter the conference with an open mind! The international environment will be very enriching. If you need support you should not hesitate to ask the staff representatives, both your own and the ones from the other universities, because they are there to help you in your learning, both subject-wise and by networking, but also when it comes to advice on presentations. Before the conference, I would advise you to ask your staff at your home university about how to comply with the your local graphical layout in the presentation material, i.e. PowerPoint presentations and posters. If the staff does not know about this, you should contact the university communication department or similar for advice. I mention this because it is important to know that you as a student represent not only yourself but also your university, and then most likely certain graphical design rules apply. I think you should also be prepared to talk about your home country and its university system, because you will for sure meet other students (and staff) that will be curious about where you come from!

Future benefit
I hope that my experience gathered in this report can help future arrangements within the U21 network, as well as participating students and staff. If anyone wants to know more details, I would be very happy to assist.

Lund, 2 October 2015

Erik Andersson

The author (left) at the Piha beach during the Peoples & Places conference, together with the Lund University student representatives, Jenny Johansson and Martin Jakubowski.