

The UKERC Meeting Place: a new model for stimulating the energy debate

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Abstract

Capturing and harnessing the interdisciplinary nature of the energy debate into useful outputs and solutions is one of the key challenges of translating ideas into action, so that we can 'just do it!'. Building networks and encouraging constructive discussion and interaction are central to furthering the policy and research agendas. With this in mind, the UK Energy Research Centre established 'The Meeting Place' in October 2004, a unique function which is dedicated to promoting the energy debate through problem-solving events, debates, networking activities and interactions with international visitors. The Meeting Place was set up to support interdisciplinary working and engagement of stakeholders of various professions within energy-related areas and provide a forum for collaborative projects addressing key issues and developing new synergies between different strands of energy research. This has been achieved through a range of formats, from one-day seminars to multiple day workshop and research-focused activities, often tackling complex and controversial problems at the forefront of the energy debate. Since it was established in October 2004, the Meeting Place has run over 40 successful events involving over 1 500 participants, both UK and international, and built up a wealth of experience and knowledge in terms of how to best engage and stimulate debate within the energy arena. As such, it represents a useful and effective model that other countries can contribute to and possibly replicate. This paper outlines the

key functions of the Meeting Place and how it can benefit the European energy research community.

Introduction

This paper introduces the concept of the 'Meeting Place', a unique function of the UK Energy Research Centre which is dedicated to promoting the energy debate through problem-solving events, debates, networking activities and interactions with international visitors. A brief overview of the origins of the Meeting Place is provided followed by an outline of the objectives of the Meeting Place and a description of how the model works in practice, with examples of some of the activities undertaken by the Meeting Place. The elements of success are discussed along with the key benefits to the European research community and beyond.

Background – origins of the Meeting Place

The UK Energy Research Centre (UKERC) was established in 2004 following a recommendation from the 2002 Energy Review initiated by Sir David King, the UK Government's Chief Scientific Advisor. The aim of the Centre is to co-ordinate energy research within the UK, with an emphasis on networking, bringing together government, industry and academics, and promoting UK involvement in international projects. It is funded by three of the UK research councils: the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of the £ 28 million cross-Research Council programme Towards a Sustainable Energy Economy (TSEC).

UKERC is a distributed centre organised around six co-ordinated themes located in different academic institutions around the country:

- Demand Reduction (Oxford)
- Future Sources of Energy (Edinburgh)
- Energy Infrastructure and Supply (Manchester)
- Energy Systems and Modelling (London)
- Environmental Sustainability (Lancaster)
- Materials for Advanced Energy Systems (London)

The Meeting Place is an international gateway and networking hub for UKERC, playing a major role in linking UK and international energy researchers, and is managed by the Environmental Change Institute of Oxford University. The Meeting Place is dedicated to promoting the energy debate and furthering policy and research agendas through problem-solving events, debates, networking activities and interactions with international visitors. The aim is to drive forward the energy debate and the problems tackled by many of its activities are often complex and controversial.

The original concept of the Meeting Place was based on other institutional models such as the Isaac Newton Institute for Mathematical Sciences, a national research institute in Cambridge which was built and funded specifically to run inter-disciplinary research programmes on selected themes in mathematics and the mathematical sciences. It attracts leading mathematical scientists from the UK and overseas to interact in research over an extended period. The thought had been to create a similar dedicated space for hosting inter-disciplinary energy activities. However, it soon became apparent that the nature of the issues and type of activity required by the energy community were not suited to such an arrangement. The problems and solutions tend to be less clearly defined than those within the mathematical field and required considerable flexibility around the size and format of the activities. In addition, the Meeting Place activities often bring together people from different disciplines and professions and managing such groups requires adaptability.

Hence the Meeting Place has evolved since its inception from the idea of a physical location to a flexible 'function', which uses a range of different venues within Oxford and beyond to provide the most suitable environment and facilities for the activity.

Meeting Place Objectives

More specifically, the Meeting Place has been set up to:

- bring together members of the UK energy community and overseas experts from different disciplines, to learn, identify problems, develop solutions and further the energy debate;
- promote interdisciplinary working and engagement of stakeholders of various professions working in energy-related areas;
- provide a forum for collaborative projects addressing key issues;

- develop new synergies between different strands of energy research; and
- build up the strengths of the research community.

How the Meeting Place works

In its first two years of operation, some 1 500 people from 35 different countries attended a total of 40 Meeting Place meetings, workshops, conferences or seminars. The emphasis is on debate and discussion rather than straightforward dissemination and is achieved through a variety of formats ranging from one day seminars, to larger conferences and multi-day research-focused activities (which result in a specific research output). Another role of the Meeting Place is to facilitate and sometimes host international visitors to work and interact with members of the UK energy research community.

The Meeting Place has funds to cover the cost of running an activity or hosting an international visitor, although the extent of funding depends largely on the nature of the programme; where there are clear and tangible research outputs resulting from an activity or visit then more financial support is available, often extending to cover travel costs for all participants as well as funding the venue and catering costs. There is also the possibility to co-fund events, encouraging buy-in and support from other organisations.

In terms of seminars and research-focused activities, the Meeting Place is open to proposals from the full range of stakeholders, based in the UK or overseas, including the energy research community, industry, government and non-governmental organisations. Proposers are required to submit a brief expression of interest which is then assessed against the Meeting Place objectives and considered within the current work programme. Once an event is accepted, the Meeting Place team then work with the proposer to develop and refine their idea, as well as providing financial and full logistical support and access to trained facilitators.

The type of participants attending an event varies depending on the nature of the activity, but typically events are multi-stakeholder, as well as interdisciplinary, involving a wide range of academics, government officials, policy-makers, non-governmental organisations and industry representatives.

Following on from the event, a workshop report is prepared summarising the key findings and outputs and this is posted to the Meeting Place website alongside any presentations from the event.

How is it different?

The Meeting Place has a number of features which make it unique in what it is able to offer:

- specialises in energy with an interdisciplinary focus;
- is a resource dedicated to networking, with funds to specifically support these activities;
- aims to further the research and policy agendas;
- brings together people from many different disciplines and professions that would not normally meet or work together;

- has an emphasis on research-focused activities which provide a specific and tangible output;
- has strong links with the UK energy research community through UKERC and the National Energy Research Network;
- provides flexibility in the location and format of activities;
- builds knowledge and expertise in delivering intellectual input for the development of activities;
- is able to build on synergies with past events thus providing a more coherent picture overall;
- provides an expanding resource of workshop reports and presentations, open to access by all.

Examples of events

To give a sense of the type of activity the Meeting Place is involved with, some examples of past Meeting Place events include:

- Climate Change Metrics two-day workshop, November 2004, Oxford. This event brought together experts of many different professions and disciplines to debate the merits of different climate change metrics options to enable inclusion of other sectors and greenhouse gases in the EU Emissions Trading Scheme (EU ETS). In particular, the outcomes of this seminar contributed to the EU-level debate on how to include aviation in the EU ETS.
- G8+ 5 Energy Research and Innovation Workshop (WIRE), May 2005, Oxford – co-sponsored by the UK Government's Department of Trade and Industry and Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. This major international workshop brought together senior policy officials and researchers from the G8 nations, plus five developing nations (Mexico, South Africa, China, India and Brazil) to discuss collaboration on clean energy and innovation. The workshop participants made a number of observations and recommendations with respect to energy research and innovation, to be put forward for consideration by the Governments of the participating countries. Outputs were also fed into the policy process of the G8 Summit held at Gleneagles in 2005.
- Italian Carbon Capture and Clean Coal workshop, February 2006, London. This international workshop, hosted jointly with the Italian Embassy, aimed to strengthen UK/Italian collaboration as a basis for submitting joint projects under the EU's 7th Framework programme. This workshop has led to further collaborative meetings between the two countries.
- Innovation and Energy Systems research-focused workshop series, March and September 2006, Oxford. This two part intensive research-focused activity brought together leading representatives from economic, institutional and management perspectives to describe their respective approaches to innovation in energy systems, share knowledge and insights, and come to a greater degree of common understanding.

The output of this series of workshops is a peer-reviewed book.

Elements of success

It is difficult to establish indicators of success for a function like the Meeting Place. Basic statistics such as the number of activities, number of participants and cost-effectiveness are useful measures, but these are relatively meaningless when attempting to assess the impact of the Meeting Place activities in pushing the debate forward and influencing research and policy thinking. There is still a question as to how to keep track of any knock-on effects of running an activity, be it an event, facilitating a project or hosting a visit, aside from the direct outputs, such as the networks established, contacts made, future research projects that grow out of these interactions. These less tangible aspects are hard to pin down. However, based on the increase in the number of events the Meeting Place is now responsible for since it first began (now averaging two events per month), the constant stream of enquiries and event proposals, and the positive feedback from participants, it is clear that the Meeting Place is fulfilling a need within the energy community and has become a well respected and recognised brand.

Benefits to the European energy research community

The Meeting Place provides a number of benefits to the European research community, not least through participation in Meeting Place activities – over a third of participants at events to date have been from countries other than the UK, the majority being from other European countries.

Aside from this direct involvement, there are opportunities to submit proposals for an activity and collaborate with UK institutions in the organisation of an event, as was the case with the Italian Clean Coal workshop outlined above. In addition, there is the facility through the Meeting Place to arrange longer term research visits for members of the European energy research community with the appropriate UK host institutions, thus allowing more in-depth working and collaboration.

The outputs of the majority of Meeting Place events will feed into and influence the energy debate at a European level, as well as the UK level, and are captured in the growing number of event reports available on the Meeting Place website, providing a useful and ever-expanding resource.

Finally, the success of the Meeting Place demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach and provides a useful model for inter-disciplinary research and networking that could be replicated in other countries, building on the knowledge and experience that has been gained from the first two years of operation in the UK.

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