

COMMENT

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# Empowering the next generation of environmental scientists: highlights from the 13th SETAC YES meeting in York, UK

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## Abstract

The 13th Young Environmental Scientists (YES) Meeting, held in York, United Kingdom, from the 11-15th August 2025, continued the tradition of fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and professional development among early-career researchers in environmental sciences. Organised by the SETAC Europe Student Advisory Council (SAC), this student-led conference brought together 111 participants from 22 countries, offering a dynamic platform for scientific exchange across all different disciplines that exist within SETAC. Under the theme, “Between Grinding Gears—Students and Early Career Scientists Under Pressure,” the meeting featured over 100 scientific contributions, four interactive workshops and three keynote lectures that addressed scientific challenges as well as personal- and professional realities faced by students and early career scientists. Beside the academic program, there were also social events to bolster networking among peers, strengthening the community that defines the YES meetings and securing its role as a cornerstone for early-career engagement within SETAC. This commentary highlights the scientific and social achievements of the 2025 edition, the financial support that made it possible, and the collaborative spirit that brought it to life. As we look to the future, the continued success of the YES Meeting depends on the passion and voluntary engagement of students and early-career researchers, whose energy and commitment will continue to advance this unique, student-driven platform thriving as a space for growth, collaboration, and lasting friendships.

**Keywords** SETAC, Conference paper, Students, Early career, Environmental science, Interdisciplinary collaboration

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## Background

First held in 2009, the SETAC Young Environmental Scientists (YES) Meeting was established, by the SETAC Europe by the Student Advisory Council (SAC) to foster early career engagement and participation in environmental sciences [3]. Enabling participation in SETAC beyond large and potentially daunting annual meetings, the YES meeting promotes early involvement in a community that can strengthen the professional development of young scientists [5]. The tradition from this first meeting has continued on across many cities and countries, including but not limited to Aachen in Germany, Kraków in Poland and Ghent in Belgium [1, 2, 9, 10]. As an entirely student-led conference, it seeks to provide a discussion space joining together various environmental disciplines, such as (eco)toxicology, chemistry, biology, and ecology, to address the multifaceted nature of the challenges we face in environmental science [7]. Such interdisciplinarity recognizes that effective environmental solutions depend on integrating knowledge from across traditional disciplinary boundaries.

The SETAC Europe SAC as main organiser was established in 2006, with the overarching goal in mind to strengthen the communication between students within SETAC and to facilitate networking with senior scientists

in SETAC [5]. Within nineteen years, the SAC has become an integral part of the SETAC structure and has grown into an international group representing people from across Europe. The SAC is more than just a student network, it is a bridge between ECRs and the wider SETAC community, bringing their voices, concerns and ideas to the SETAC board of directors (BoD). In 2021, this student perspective found its formal representation on the BoD and has proven to be an invaluable asset for the BoD, the students of SETAC and its ECRs and an integral part of SETAC Europe governance [8]. Additionally, the SAC organises a diverse set of events at the annual meetings in addition to the YES meeting. Where the Europe SAC started out alone, today SAC has been established in all global branches of SETAC.

This year's edition in York was led by Nahum Ashfield (Meeting Chair) and Isabel Navarro Law (Meeting Co-Chair), who together with the SETAC Europe SAC spent more than a year planning the 13th edition of the YES meeting. Plans to hold the next meeting in York were first raised at the 12th YES meeting in Landau. Nahum approached the SAC with the idea, showcasing the importance of student engagement in upholding the tradition of the YES meeting.



**Fig. 1** Attendees of the YES 2025 meeting

Under the topic of this year's meeting, "Between Grinding Gears—Students and Early Career Scientists Under Pressure", participants (Fig. 1) were encouraged to participate in interactive workshops, inspired by keynotes addressing the highs and lows that come with forging a career in environmental science, highlighting that the path is rarely straightforward. The formal scientific program was also complimented by organised social activities to foster additional networking opportunities.

### Main event

Following registration on Monday, this year's YES meeting kicked off with the first interactive workshops. Helen Goulding from Quercus Training Ltd hosted the first workshop entitled 'Presenting with Confidence' in which she helped attendees face their fears associated with presenting to audiences (Fig. 2). The workshop featured many practical tips, including how to use body language to your advantage, designing relevant content and how to handle tricky questions, which participants went on to use in their own platform presentations later in the week.

The second workshop hosted by Dr Drew Szabo, a postdoctoral researcher in the chemistry department at the University of York, on the topic of suspect and non-target screening was both timely and highly relevant. This hands-on workshop covered basic principles of non-target and suspect screening in environmental samples,

focusing on detection, identification and prioritization of small molecules and metabolites by high resolution mass spectrometry. Using an R workflow this workshop gave attendees an idea of the possibilities modern approaches offer to address complex environmental analyses.

On Tuesday, meeting attendees had the opportunity to join one of a further two workshops, this time either exploring the world of environmental consultants or diving deeper into statistical analyses relevant to environmental research.

Hosted in the form of an escape-room, Liz Hart and her team from Hart Environmental and England's Environment Agency, led a workshop centred around the challenges faced by environmental consultants. Through problem solving activities this workshop gave a quick view into the day-to-day work life of an environmental consultant, giving young environmental scientists a taste of one potential career path in the field.

With data handling being central to environmental research, Professor Emma Rand from the University of York, supported by Dr Pasky Miranda, ran a workshop that introduced participants to RStudio for statistical analysis. This workshop was available for all attendees, regardless of their current level of skill in RStudio [6]. Attendees were taught how to find their way around the RStudio windows, summarize data, create and plot data using ggplot, and write well-commented scripts, all fundamental starting points for confident data management and analysis.



**Fig. 2** From the workshop entitled 'Presenting with Confidence' hosted by Helen Goulding from Quercus Training Ltd

### Keynotes

Three keynote speakers shared valuable perspectives on this year's central theme: "Students Under Pressure". Each speaker approached the topic through a deeply personal lens borne out of their own experiences and career trajectories, sharing some valuable life and career lessons along the way.

During the opening ceremony on Monday Professor Laura Carter, University of Leeds, reflected on challenges faced by early career researchers, many of which she herself had faced. She emphasised the importance of being strategic, thinking creatively and defining success on one's own terms. Ultimately, highlighting that an academic career is full of peaks and troughs, but through purpose and resilience it is possible to carve out a meaningful and fulfilling path.

Dr Liz Collison delivered the second keynote, taking the audience on her career journey shaped by curiosity and adaptability. Her presentation highlighted the reality that career paths are rarely linear, hers unexpectedly took her to New Zealand before returning to the UK, and she encouraged others to trust the process, remain

open to opportunities and value the experiences that shape their journey (Fig. 3).

As the final keynote speaker Dr Sabine Apitz shared her experiences starting her career in chemistry and environmental science as one of the first women in the field at the time. Her experiences again highlighted that career paths are often not easy or straightforward. She shone a spotlight on the importance of networking and building collaborations through events such as the SETAC YES meetings. Her final message was clear: the people you meet along the way can shape your career for a lifetime.

### Scientific program

Tuesday also saw the start of the scientific program for this year's meeting. Made up of 26 volunteers from SETAC Europe, the SETAC SAC and the SETAC North America SAC (NASAC), the scientific committee shaped the program selecting nine sessions, comprising a total of 113 contributions in the form of posters and platform presentations. Topics covered by the sessions reflect the breadth of research within the SETAC community and included:



**Fig. 3** Dr Liz Collison delivering her keynote presentation entitled 'When I grow up, I want to be a regulatory ecotoxicologist...'

- Aquatic ecotoxicology (16)
- One Health (4)
- Applied ecotoxicology, including LCA and science-to-policy and regulation (4)
- Computational ecotoxicology and modelling (4)
- Analytical challenges in environmental sciences (4)
- Microplastics and other anthropogenic matrices (4)
- Terrestrial ecotoxicology and soil ecology (8)
- Multiple stressors and climate change (8)
- New approach methodologies, including advancing chemical safety assessment and reducing animal use (4)

Together, these sessions provided a platform for exchange across disciplines. Feedback and questions to platform presenters generated interesting discussions and potential new collaborations. Additionally, the poster sessions during coffee breaks proved to be valuable moments for networking and more in-depth discussions (Fig. 4).

#### Social events

Alongside the scientific program, two official social events were organised for the attendees. These events

were aimed at fostering social connections between peers and to facilitate networking in a more relaxed format. The first of these events was a Pub Quiz hosted at Brew York on Monday evening. Attendees were able to get together in teams and eat street food during the six-round quiz, with the winning group taking home beer glasses from the brewery.

On Tuesday night, the second official social event was the highly anticipated student party, hosted at a riverside bar in York. Here, attendees were able to talk (and dance) in a relaxed and friendly environment. Together the two events sparked so many new friendships that the conference ended with an impromptu third social event, a get-together by the River Ouse (Fig. 5). We hope that connections formed here will continue through the attendees' environmental science journeys and well into the future!

#### Closing

The 13th Young Environmental Scientists Meeting in York marked another successful chapter in the long tradition of empowering students and early career scientists. During four days of inspiring keynotes, engaging workshops and scientific discussions, participants shared their experiences, challenges and hopes as young environmental scientists.



**Fig. 4** Poster sessions during the coffee breaks proved once again to be valuable moments for networking and deeper discussions



**Fig. 5** The YES meeting successfully facilitated new connections between attendees, resulting in a spontaneous third social event by the river Ouse

This year's meeting ended with the awards for the best presentations (Fig. 6). Mihai-Ovidiu Degeratu received the Best Platform Presentation Award for his work on '*Proteomics-Based Evaluation of the Zebrafish PAC2 Cell Line as a Model to Study Molecular Mechanisms of Chemical Toxicity in Fish*'. Charley Clayton was recognized with the Best Poster Award for her work on '*Developing Innovative Techniques to Monitor Chemical and Microbial Pollution*'.

Beyond the awards and scientific achievements, what stood out the most in York was the sense of community and mutual support among participants. Whether during poster sessions, workshops or informal conversations by the river, everyone contributed to an atmosphere of openness and genuine exchange. Looking ahead, the memories, ideas, and collaborations born in York will keep growing, as a reminder that the future of environmental science is bright, especially when young scientists come together with passion and purpose.

#### Finances

Hosting an international conference involves substantial expenses, and for student- or volunteer-led events,

securing sponsorship is essential to realising meetings. The success of this year's conference was made possible through the generous contributions of sponsors, whose support was vital in ensuring both the smooth organisation and inclusivity of the event. The YES meetings have consistently benefited from SETAC's commitment, both logistically and financially, and this year's support of €16,000, ensured the feasibility of hosting the meeting in York. Including these funds, the Local Organising Committee (LOC) and SAC raised a total of €32,090, with the remaining sponsorship provided by eight donors (Figure S1).

Of the €32,090 budget, the majority was spent on securing the venue and catering, followed by €7,360 allocated to travel grants. These grants played a crucial role in supporting students from around the world to present their research, and actively participate in the SETAC student community, an opportunity that, for many, might otherwise have been out of reach. Printed materials, including programmes, badges, and signage, were the next largest expenses, followed by workshop fees (although three out of four workshops had no cost) and social events (Figure S2).



**Fig. 6** The winners of the best presentation awards with the local organising committee (LOC). From left to right: Nahum Ashfield (LOC chair), Mihai-Ovidiu Degeratu (winner of the best platform presentation award), Charley Clayton (winner of the best poster award), Isabel Navarro Law (LOC co-chair) and Micha Wehrli (SAC chair)

During financial planning, a contingency budget was established to cover unexpected costs. Despite this, final expenses came in over €3,000 under budget. This was a result of factors such as reduced catering costs, unused travel grants, and conservative spending. Any unspent funds from this meeting will be allocated to future SETAC student events, supporting the continued development of the next generation of environmental scientists.

#### Attendees

The majority of attendees at the 13th YES Meeting were PhD students. However, the meeting also attracted many master's students and postdocs, in addition to bachelor's and other early career scientists (Fig. 7). Attendees travelled from all over the world to York for the YES meeting, with representation for institutions from a total of 22 countries spanning 5 continents (Fig. 8). This diverse mix of attendees highlights the contribution of this meeting

to the creation of a global community of environmental scientists.

#### Survey results

Following the meeting 44 attendees completed the post conference satisfaction survey. Results (Figure S3–S8) of this survey showed that for 42% of attendees this was their first ever SETAC meeting, with 73% hearing about it from colleagues or supervisors. The four main factors reported, which led to attendance at this meeting were the opportunity to present one's research, networking, the absence of a registration fee and the scientific program. Most respondents indicated that they were satisfied to very satisfied with the scientific program that was offered at the YES meeting. Organised social events during the meeting were generally agreed to be useful ways to speak to new people, with a welcoming and friendly atmosphere that had enhanced their experience at the conference. The majority of respondents also said

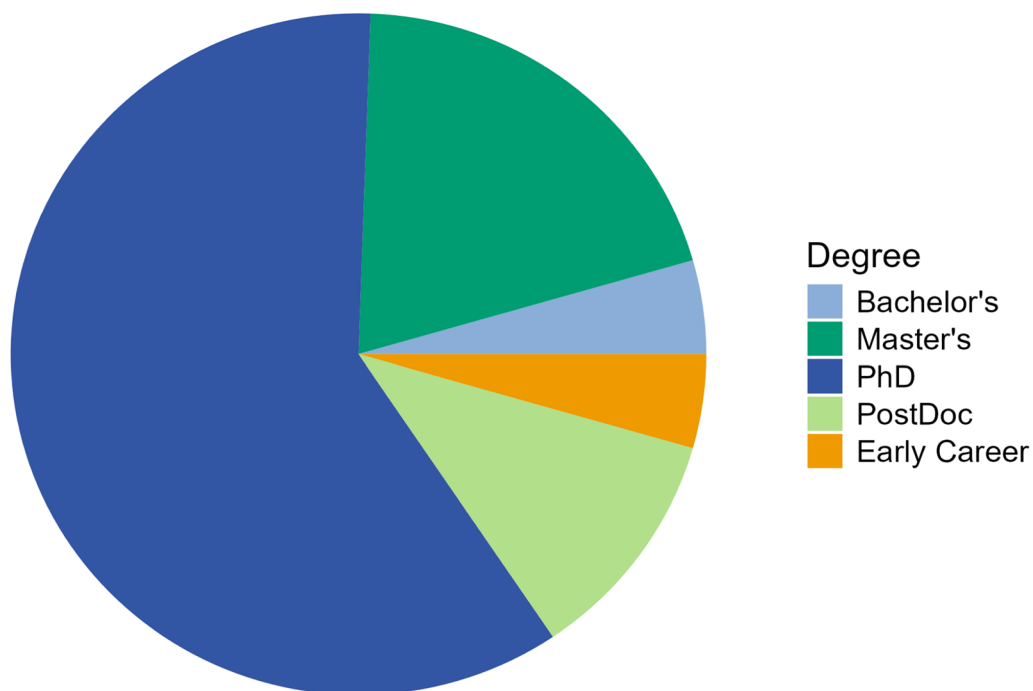


Fig. 7 The current roles of the 111 attendees

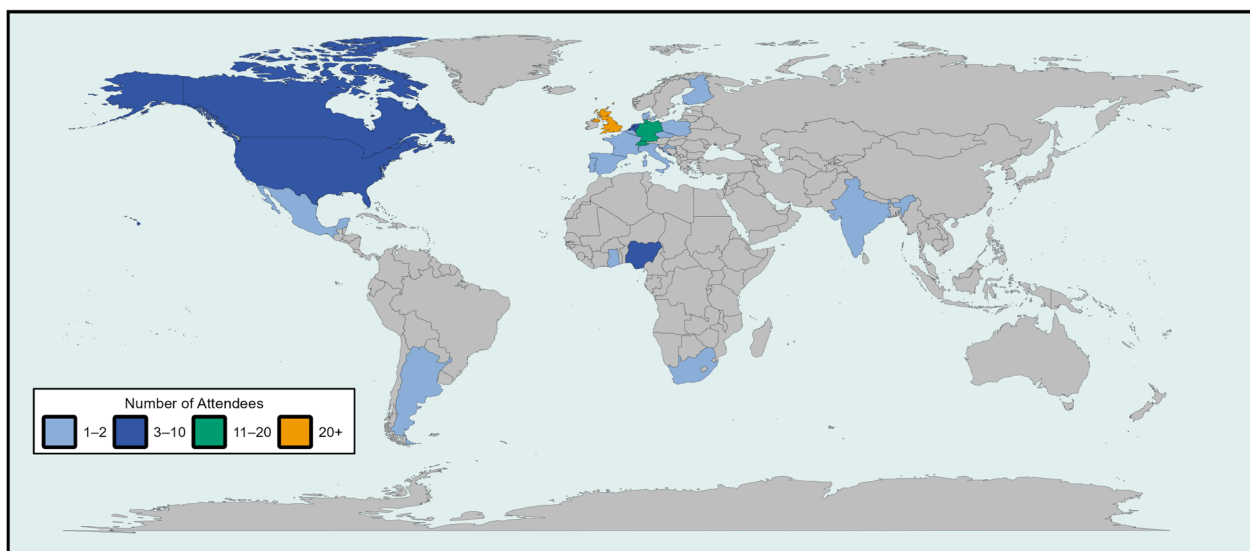


Fig. 8 Summary map of participating attendees' institution country, countries with no attendee representation shown in grey

they would be very likely to recommend the SETAC YES meeting to others.

**Final remarks, thanks and next steps**

We extend our sincere gratitude to SETAC Europe, Eawag, BASE, Metals Environmental Research Associations (MERA), the Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC),

GRADE of Goethe University, ECORISC, Corteva Agriscience, Syngenta, Hart Environmental, and the University of York for their steadfast commitment to fostering early-career scientists and strengthening the broader environmental science network. Without their financial help, it would have been impossible to create this meeting as it was. We would also like to thank the keynote



**Fig. 9** The YES attendees outside of the National STEM learning centre in York

speakers and workshop leaders for sharing their time and expertise.

Equally, the realization of this conference was only possible thanks to the dedication and collaborative spirit of the Local Organising Committee, the Scientific Committee, and the SETAC Europe Student Advisory Council (SAC). Over the past eighteen months, their collective effort, creativity, and perseverance shaped every aspect of the meeting. In particular, we wish to express our heartfelt thanks to Kelly Derom and Rebecca Bundschuh from the SETAC office, whose continuous support and guidance were indispensable throughout the process.

Finally, our deepest appreciation goes to all students who travelled to York to take part in the YES meeting (Figs. 1, 9). Your enthusiasm, curiosity, and scientific contributions formed the core of this event, turning it into a vibrant space of exchange and inspiration. We hope that your experiences will encourage continued engagement in voluntary and community-driven initiatives, as the vitality of the YES tradition relies on the energy and involvement of its participants.

Looking ahead, we are confident that the spirit of the YES meeting will persist as a student-led forum for

peer-to-peer learning, collaboration, and friendship, both within and beyond the academic sphere.

The next 14th YES meeting is right around the corner and will be held by the North America Student Advisory Council (NASAC) at the University of South Carolina (USC) in Columbia, USA, from the 4-7th August 2026 [4]. The preparations for the 15th European 2027 edition, in Prague in the Czech Republic, have also already begun, and we look forward to welcoming both returning and new participants to continue this inspiring tradition.

#### Abbreviations

BoD	Board of Directors
ECR	Early career researcher
LOC	Local organising committee
SETAC	Society of environmental toxicology and chemistry
SAC Europe	SETAC Europe Student Advisory Council
NASAC	North America Student Advisory Council

#### Supplementary Information

The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12302-026-01344-5>.

Additional file 1

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**Author contributions**

M.W., N.A., I.N.L., M.S., and B.S. lead conference organization, supervision, conceptualization, drafting, writing, reviewing, and funding acquisition. J.A., F.C., C.M., S.J., H.B., B.D., M.S., K.G., S.G., S.O., and F.M. contributed to organization, funding acquisition, drafting, writing and reviewing.

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**Data availability**

No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

**Declarations****Ethics approval and consent to participate**

Not applicable.

**Consent for publication**

All attendees of the YES2025 meeting were asked for permission at the registration and agreed to use the photos taken at the conference for publication. This agreement was part of the conference registration form, and a list can be provided upon request.

**Competing of interests**

The authors declare no competing interests.

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