

## Transcript

### Finalists from the 2016 competition share their thoughts on the Three Minute Thesis

#### Q: How would you describe the challenge of presenting your thesis in three minutes?

**Mahmoud Maina:** I must say that it's quite exciting but challenging, and at the same time extremely helpful. So it's quite exciting because you get to present about your research to the public, but at the same time challenging because you get to compress 80,000 words of your thesis into three minutes. Which means every sentence, every word, is extremely important.

**Anna Webb:** It was hard but it was fun. It's certainly tricky to try and distil three or four years of research into just three minutes, but it forces you to be creative, and to take a step back from your research to think about why it is really important for the general public, and why it is exciting for them. And also, how you can make it accessible to them, but also maintaining what is unique about your research, not making it too broad.

**Emma Scanlan:** The largest challenge was how to recalibrate and reverse from the minutiae of what I am doing in 'Chapter three: Conclusion', back to the big questions. It really was a challenge to zoom out and to say: what I am doing, why am I doing it, and why does it matter? But actually, engaging with that challenge I found very helpful in the completion of my thesis, and in particular focusing on things like the introduction and conclusion which really do have to deal with those questions.

#### Q: How have you benefited from entering the competition?

**Anna Webb:** It's given me a lot of confidence in my presenting skills, and also because I put a lot of work into thinking how I'd present to them it's given me a framework to be able to actually explain my research to others. So whether that is in the context of a formal talk, or just down at the pub with my friends or my family, it's given me the ability to be able to tell people what I'm doing, and hopefully make them think it's exciting.

**Emma Scanlan:** Well I've benefited in many ways, but probably the most immediate was that as you do specialise in your thesis, and you're getting towards the end, you end up being quite isolated, in the sense that whether or not you are on campus or off campus (and I was off campus) you do tend to be wrapped up with people who study similar things to you, or you go to conferences with people who study the same area as you, and for me it was really rewarding to reconnect with the wider doctoral community here.

**Mahmoud Maina:** So I must say that it has really benefited some of the outreach activities that I've been doing. In fact, I went onto organise a series of outreach activities back in Nigeria, in some places in Africa, communicating to policy-makers, to school students, and the TMT competition really helped in giving me that confidence as well as allowing me to know the right words to use in telling people really complicated aspects of my research.

**Emma Scanlan:** It was also a lesson in how to present in a very different way, which I think is becoming increasingly necessary for researchers in our current academic environment.

#### Q: How did you prepare for the competition?

**Anna Webb:** We had a training day initially and that helped me to get some initial ideas down on paper and gave me some tips on how to prepare, and then it was a matter of just practicing, going back and tweaking what I had written, practicing again, making my colleagues listen to me, making my family listen to me, just lots of practice.

**Emma Scanlan:** The doctoral workshop was incredibly useful in terms of not just communicating the facts, but also communicating the story, and how to communicate well with an audience over a very short period of time, who perhaps weren't familiar with the facts and figures of what we were doing, but really wanted to engage on a story level.

**Q: Would you encourage other PhD students to enter the competition?**

**Mahmoud Maina:** Yes, I would definitely encourage other PhD students to enter the competition because it allows them to tell the public about what they have been doing in the past three or four years. You *want* people to know what you are doing.

At the same time, it's an opportunity to boost your presentation skills and who knows, if you end up winning something you become a minor celebrity!

**Anna Webb:** I'd definitely encourage other PhD students to enter, it was great fun and it was a really useful thing actually to be able to take a step back from research and think about why it's important and why other people should be getting excited about it. And it helped me to step back and look at it with fresh eyes and get re-excited about it, even if things aren't going well in the lab on that day or whatever.

**Emma Scanlan:** It was a really friendly group of people, really interesting research, intellectually stimulating and different. And in terms of completing my thesis I found the whole exercise in communicating my research clearly, and making myself think very widely about what I was doing and where I fitted in, incredibly useful.

**Anna Webb tells us how she spent her award...**

**Anna Webb:** I went to a conference last week in Florence, an Italian quantum information science conference, where I learnt lots of physics, ate lots of nice food, and saw lots of beautiful things in Florence.