

ADVICE TO CONFERENCE ORGANISERS

Here are some pointers for conference organisers, intended to help especially those who are taking on the challenge of organising a conference for the first time. The set of questions and suggestions below are not laid out in sequence – you will need to be thinking of many of these issues at the same time.

When? Deciding upon a date is the one of the first challenges – don't pick one randomly – think of how it relates to other relevant events, national holidays (in Britain and elsewhere) and the availability of potential keynote speakers. And also ask yourself: how long? One-day is focused as well as being the simplest option in terms of costs and organisation; overnight can be more sociable and more intense, but you raise costs and also the time-demands made on those attending.

Where? This may be straightforward: you have a home institution and it has to be there. If you are in that situation, you still have to decide on a specific venue – will the rooms you want be too small or (nearly as bad) too large? Will there be the other facilities you might need nearby? Will there be someone on hand if things go wrong? And if you have a group of organisers drawn from different places, each proposing a location, you will have to set some criteria to help make your decision. Think about what else is available in each possible location and how accessible it is to delegates coming from different places.

What? Think about the remit of your conference – is it going to be advertised as a fairly general event? If so, will there be particular strands or a focus on speakers at a specific stage in their career (eg graduates)? Will there then be a need for parallel sessions? If it is going to be a particular theme, how will you express that so that it's wide enough to attract the sort of speakers and delegates you want?

Who? There are several aspects to this. First, if you are reading this, you're probably already thinking of being an organiser: can you do it on your own or do you need one or more collaborators? The smaller group organising, the more burden on each set of shoulders – but also the shorter the communication lines. Second, are you going to have invited lecturers? If so, when are they available and how much will be the costs you need to put in the budget? Third, how are you going to decide on speakers? If you are going to have a call for papers (CFP), work out the timetable – you will need to give time to advertise, to receive proposals and to decide and then to announce the full programme well ahead of the event itself.

How much? Start preparing a budget early. This might seem daunting without firm information, but you will need to do this both in order to make bids for funding and in order to set the registration fees. Try to think of all the possible budget lines – examples of outgoings will be: travel costs of invited speakers, accommodation costs of those speakers, catering per head, room-bookings, publicity, stationery; examples of income will be: sponsorship, registration fees, charges to any display stands. Over time, you will be able to revise the budget and add further detail: what matters early on is that you have realistic 'headline figures' – too low and you will end up with a large debt, too high and you may frighten off potential funding.

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How well-known? It is important that alongside a budget you have a timetable – again, funding bodies may want to see this – which outlines not just when you’ll have a CFP but also when registration will open and close. Alongside that, you will have to think how best to raise the profile of your event – there are e-mail lists, including that run by the Society, and websites, but will they get the notice you want? Posters and flyers can both be useful (remember to include in your budget). And are there personal contacts? At the same time, have a sense of the optimum number of people you want – and that doesn’t necessarily mean the more the merrier! Over a certain size and discussion will become more limited: you need to decide whether your event is more about hearing papers or engaging in discussion about them.

What extra? Think also about what can happen in addition to the sessions themselves. How are you going to look after the speakers – and the delegates more generally when they are with you? What receptions and dinners are organised (are they in the budget)? Are there other events locally that people might want to attend? Are you going to organise a trip or an evening event?

Organising a conference is never simple. At times, the arrangements can be all-consuming, especially in the run-up to, and during, the event itself. Make sure you put aside enough time to ensure everything can be in place – but don’t let it take over your life. And, remember: what you are organising is going to have a value for all those attend. A stimulating and friendly conference will remain in your delegates’ minds for many years. That’s no mean achievement.

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