

10 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW WHEN ORGANIZING AN ACADEMIC CONFERENCE

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This brief is for those of you involved (or considering to get involved) in organizing an academic conference. Organizing an academic conference is a task that many of us take on at some point of our career. It can be an incredibly fun and rewarding experience and allows you to develop a whole new set of skills. It may also seem very daunting. Organizing an academic conference can make you feel overwhelmed by the workload and uncertainties. Has something slipped my mind? What if the company managing the room blocks of the hotels where participants are supposed to stay goes bankrupt? (this actually happened to one of us!) How do we deal with the uncertainties associated with the coronavirus pandemic?

For this, and for all the other things that may or may not happen, we develop here a sort of anticipatory governance for conference organization, or, in non-academic terms, a few tips to allow you to serenely organize an academic conference in a highly uncertain world.

1. **Plan ahead.** Develop a strategy 9 to 12 months in advance, with specific objectives and milestones. In terms of objectives, think about the added-value of your event: the conferences market is growing, so you need to develop a rationale to differentiate from a myriad of existing events. In terms of milestones, develop a timeline with the most important dates, e.g. publication of the call for papers, reviewing process and emailing to the accepted and declined participants, opening and closing of different registration rates, etc.
2. **Think about your outputs.** If you want to make an impact, your event should not end on the last conference day. Outputs may include, of course, publications (e.g. selecting the best conference papers for a Special Issue or an Edited Volume), but also building up a network and/or coalition on the thematic focus of your conference. For instance, you may want to set up a governance structure, such as a steering committee including, e.g., the keynote speakers of your event, for jointly developing the publication outputs and organizing research dissemination events that target the policy arena.
3. **Think about a communication strategy.** This first involves a website. Your conference website is extremely important as it will showcase your event, answer the participants' questions and allow them to submit their papers and register. Your website should therefore welcome potential participants with strong visuals (e.g. you may want to develop a logo for the conference) and the most important details and dates. Second, you should also think about how to engage further the community on social media, prior to and during the conference. Think about a hashtag so that people engage and connect easily. Social media may also be used as a channel for remote participants to ask questions to the conference panelists, this can be a useful avenue to promote the engagement of scholars from the Global South who might not be able to participate physically. In this case, be mindful of involving a specific team member, onsite, in channelling those questions to the speakers.

4. **Work with a team and delegate.** You should not carry the vast amount of work related to the organization of a conference all by yourself. This entails, for instance, budget planning, emailing, registrations, website update, etc. The output, that is, your conference, will very much depend on the people you gather on your team. Surround yourself with enthusiastic, organised, communicative team players, and make sure everyone is clear about what their role and responsibilities are from the start. Also, in addition to your core team, you can always think about enrolling students. Remember to organize regular meetings to share any new information.
5. **Think about your programme.** This first involves developing the overall theme and the related Call for Papers of the conference. Once you have a pool of accepted papers following a blinded review process, you can think about the structure of the programme. There are some key ingredients to every academic conference programme: plenary presentations, parallel sessions, and discussion panels. It is important to plan these well to allow all participants to share their work. One thing to keep in mind is to allow sufficient time for discussion and informal conversation. It might be tempting to pack a lot of content in a small amount of time. However, the time in between sessions is just as valuable for participants to interact and build their network. You might also want to think about other programme elements that can add creativity to your event. How about having a musician at your opening plenary? An art exhibition that participants can attend between sessions? Or a game to play with all attendants? These can be different ways for conference participants to interact and forge connections last beyond the conference.
6. **Carefully choose your keynote speakers.** Your keynote speakers are your conference showcase, so you should be mindful of the geographical and gender balance of the sessions that involve them. Women and researchers from the Global South are underrepresented in global change science. This applies to the publication of articles in peer-reviewed journals, as well as to the participation to international academic conferences. When funding is an issue –and this is mainly the case for Global South participants– you can envision to develop remote participation and/or livestreaming, so that those who might not have the financial resources to participate in person, can still participate in a meaningful way and share their knowledge.
7. **Carefully select your partners.** Engaging partner institutions as sponsors or co-hosts to the conference is a good way to enhance the scientific programme, engage a wider network of participants and gain greater financial security for the overall planning. However, it is important to ensure that the partner relationship is mutually beneficial and the selected partners are suitably aligned with the theme of the conference and the outputs you envision. Dedicating hours on brainstorming and identifying the partners you wish to approach is therefore usually time well invested.
8. **Carefully select your venue (and check the cancellation policy).** Think about your requirements (number of accepted papers and number of parallel sessions) and about the needs of your audience (the venue should be comfortable and also easily accessible). Check the lighting and overall acoustics as well as the possibility to rent out technical material (beamer, microphones, audio, etc.). Don't hesitate to visit the venue several times and ask for different quotations. Also, remember to check the cancellation conditions in case of force majeure. If you decide to hold your conference fully online, as many of us will in the near future due to the Coronavirus, finding a good software will depend on your needs: many software now offer different features such as webinar (e.g. for plenary sessions), breakout rooms (e.g. for parallel sessions),

instant messaging, recording, etc. Please carefully check the safety and privacy policies, you don't want your online conference hacked or your data sold to third parties. Zoom, for instance, has recently been at the center of many controversies (see, for instance, [this article](#) from The Guardian). Safer options include WebEx and BlueJeans - we'll have more feedback on recent experiences in the next issue!

9. **Find a good software for conference management.** Managing registrations, payments, and other administrative tasks manually is highly time-consuming and may lead to some mistakes. Luckily, there are software that were designed to help. Some software are specifically designed for the research community, and allow you to manage abstract review, registrations, and programme development. For instance, when it comes to programme development, such software come with handy features such as allowing you to check for timing conflicts between paper presenters and session chairs. Conference management software thus remove endless manual tasks, help your team work collaboratively, and will save you time (and stress).
10. **Have fun!** Organizing a conference is an opportunity to grow your skill set and your network. Accept that not everything will go exactly as planned and that it will be a successful event anyway. Take time during the conference to enjoy what you have achieved.