

Organizing a Conference

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So you're planning a conference! Congratulations—but (as an old hand) I wonder if you fully realise what you may be letting yourself in for! Here is a composite nightmare—all things that have actually happened in my experience, but fortunately not all on the same occasion.

On the day of arrival, a key speaker phones to say she won't be coming. A rail strike results in most of the participants arriving in the early hours of the morning. One of the opening speakers is detained at immigration because of not having obtained a visa. The hotel where everyone is staying has just told you that their quotation did not include tourist tax, and that it does not accept credit cards. Some people arrive who have not been invited. The lecture theatre booked for the opening address—the only one suitable—has been double-booked. The photocopier has broken down. Several people are dissatisfied with their accommodation and want to change hotels. Others thought the last day of lectures was the day of departure and want to change all their travel arrangements. One participant wants to see a doctor and another needs a dentist. The luggage of another participant has gone astray and someone else has had his passport, travellers cheques, etc. stolen. And so on.

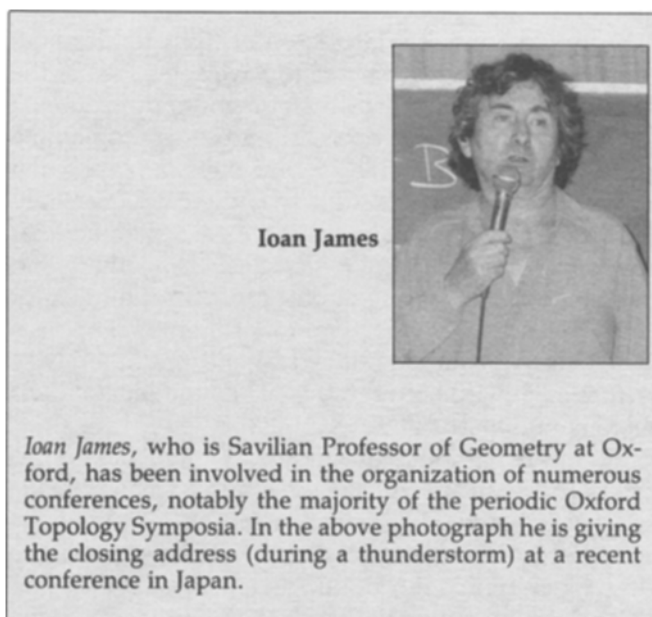
Would it help if I ran over some of the many points that may need to be considered by someone in your position? I'm assuming that what you have in mind is an average sort of conference—say up to a hundred people, lasting for up to a week—but some of the points I'm going to make apply to conferences of any size or duration. One thing I'd like to say at the outset: You ought to be able to participate fully in the conference yourself. That means very careful advance planning so that, during the conference itself, there is nothing to distract you apart from the unforeseeable. There are sure to be problems, but I hope very much that, not long after the conference opens, you will be able to retreat into the background and, although an organiser, participate in the same way as everyone else.

No doubt you will have a committee to support you. This is important because if difficult decisions have to

be taken (as is quite likely) it is a great relief to be able to refer them to a committee rather than have to take personal responsibility for them. In the end, however, every conference is mainly due to the efforts of a single individual who does almost all the work. That individual, I gather, will be you.

Undoubtedly the first thing you need to get clear is what the purpose of the conference is to be. For instance is it to review recent progress in the field? Is it to provide an opportunity for experts to talk about their latest ideas? Is it to give new people a chance to make their debut? Will some effort be made to cater to non-specialists? Is it intended to celebrate some anniversary or to help establish the reputation of some institution as a centre for the subject?

Next it is necessary to make an estimate of the desirable numbers and type of participants. There is an obvious difference in character between a small conference of around 50, say, and a large one, of 100 plus. It is also necessary to decide whether the conference should be open to all comers (or at least to all who have registered in advance) or should be restricted in some way. For example, attendance may be by invita-



"Well, you've learned the first rule of conferences, kid. Never go to lectures. Unless you're giving one yourself, of course."

Small World, David Lodge

tion only: this may mean a list fixed at an early stage or may mean that there is discretion to send an invitation to anyone who lets it be known he wishes one.

It is not unusual to begin by inviting a few stars—if this is done sufficiently far in advance it will not be easy for them to think of a polite excuse for saying no—and then make use of their names in the promotional literature for the meeting.

Next it is necessary to decide when and where the conference is to be held—these two decisions are somewhat related, of course. It is important to allow plenty of time for planning—three years is not too long. Find out as much as possible about other conferences being planned that might, on the one hand, clash with or, on the other hand, could usefully be combined with yours. (Some information can be obtained from the *AMS Notices*, the *LMS* newsletter, the *Canberra* newsletter, etc., but asking around is useful also.) Then it is necessary to consider when participants are likely to be free to attend (the incidence of university terms varies a lot). Once the location has been chosen, it is necessary to find out whether climatic conditions are likely to be favourable, and whether there are any public holidays that might cause problems. Peak holiday periods should be avoided because of difficulties with travel and accommodation.

Even if the precise dates are not fixed until a later stage it is obviously desirable to have some idea of the duration. Generally three or four hours of lectures a day is the limit for most people, and if the programme lasts for more than three or four days, a break of at least half a day in the middle would be a relief. When the time comes to fix dates, it is well to remember that some days may be better for travel than others and that some combinations of dates may fit the rules for cheap plane fares better than others. Confusion often arises between the day of arrival and the first day of lectures, likewise between the last day of lectures and the day of departure.

There are various considerations involved in deciding the venue for the meeting, and a balance has to be struck between various desiderata. Usually the choice is between a university or similar institution, a conference centre run or supported by a foundation, and a location such as a hotel with appropriate facili-

ties. Practical considerations are of great importance, of course. Will the place be easy for most participants to reach? Are there lecture rooms of the right capacity and are they properly equipped? Is the accommodation of a suitable standard? Are there enough rooms—are there rooms for couples and families? Where do people go for meals? How about dietary requirements? Where do participants go between lectures—are there common rooms and rooms for discussions? Where can people congregate in the evenings? If possible, all other requirements need to be combined with an attractive location. It is a good idea to inspect possible places thoroughly before reaching a decision.

Turning now to the subject of finance, it is necessary to prepare a realistic budget. Quotations are necessary for use of facilities, for meals, and for accommodation. If local transport may be required, what will the cost be? How much should be allowed for secretarial services, for postage, telephone, photocopying, etc.? Should a conference bank account be opened? Will advance money be needed?

Then there is the question of whether to offer financial assistance to participants. Should this be offered to everyone or to those who could not attend otherwise? Should grants be offered to invited speakers or to members of the committee? Should they be for a specific sum or a proportion of expenses? Should they be for travel and/or accommodation and/or food? Should they be payable in advance, during the conference, or afterwards? Will the organisers try to find out the funding position of individuals before allocating subsidies from conference funds and if so how?

Naturally some of these matters can only be decided once the availability of funds has been investigated. Possible grant-giving bodies should be contacted at an early stage to find out about forms, deadlines, and any special conditions that might affect your plans. How long will it be before a decision is given? Publishers could also be worth contacting, particularly if there are going to be promotional opportunities for books or journals. Governmental cultural organisations will sometimes offer grants for participants from particular countries. It is usual to charge a registration fee (which may or may not include social events); perhaps there should be a reduced fee for students. It is also a good idea to get clear in advance what is to happen in the event of a surplus or deficit at the end of it all.

It is also necessary to decide whether a proceedings volume should be published and, if so, to interest a publisher and choose an editor. Will contributions be restricted to the invited speakers? What advice/instructions should be given to an author as to format? What will be the deadline for receipt of contributions? Will they be refereed? Will the volume be included in the registration fee or available to participants at a reduced rate? Who will be entitled to royalties?

Some publicity will be necessary, unless participa-



Conference on topology and differential structures, Mexico City, July 1971.

tion is strictly by invitation only. In any case, listing in the *AMS Notices*, *LMS newsletter*, etc. is helpful to others who might be planning a conference in the same field. Direct mail (i.e., circularising prospective participants) is probably more effective than advertising in journals, but the latter is likely to attract the attention of people the committee might not have thought of.

As regards the programme, it is necessary to decide whether speakers will be required to give titles (or even abstracts) in advance. Will there be parallel sessions? Will short talks by non-invited speakers be encouraged/permitted? Will there be poster sessions? Should some "star" speakers be kept until the end to help prevent people drifting away? Should the whole programme be fixed up in advance or should some gaps be left to be filled at the last minute in the light of recent developments and/or offers of talks? Bear in mind that people invited to speak without advance notice may not have brought notes, slides, etc.

Participants will need advance information about arrival/departure procedures, and at least a provisional programme. The correct address for mail and telephone number (if only for emergencies) will also be needed, and a local map with the registration desk and other important locations marked. Drivers would no doubt appreciate a semi-local map as well. Some participants may need visas, which may take time to obtain and require a formal letter of invitation; these and other difficulties individuals may experience should be foreseen as far as possible. What methods of payment are acceptable to (i) the conference office, (ii)

hotels etc? Should individuals be recommended to take out personal medical insurance? On the whole, the more general information sent out in advance the less correspondence with individuals.

On arrival participants will need further information on, for example, collection of grants, cashing of cheques, use of library facilities, photocopying, and will need as well advice about restaurants, etc., an updated programme and a list of participants. Don't forget about identity labels! Be prepared for late arrivals.

Finally there is the social programme. Will there be a reception and/or banquet—if so, will there be speeches? Will there be excursions? How about sporting facilities? What plays/concerts/films/exhibitions will be on during the conference? Does the local tourist office have any useful literature? Will any local firms offer concessions to participants—or gifts? Will there be special arrangements for spouses, children, etc.? Will there be a group photograph and, if so, should it be professional or amateur?

Of course there are a hundred and one other things you will need to think about, depending on the actual venue of the conference and so forth.

I began with a nightmare so let me end with a dream. Towards the end of the banquet the senior participant proposes a vote of thanks. He says how much the lectures have helped him to understand the subject better and how exciting the new theories and results announced in the course of the conference have been. He says that the informal discussions have been equally valuable and that some very interesting new ideas have emerged in the course of these. He says how very agreeable it is to meet old friends and how glad he is to have had the opportunity to meet some people he hitherto knew only by reputation. He thanks various sponsors for their financial support. Finally he congratulates the committee, and especially you, on the excellence of the arrangements, and now everyone is on his feet drinking your health. I hope that at that point, if not before, you will feel that all the effort has been worthwhile.

The modern conference resembles the pilgrimage of medieval Christendom in that it allows the participants to indulge themselves in all the pleasures and diversions of travel while appearing to be austere bent on self-improvement.

Small World, David Lodge

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