

Running A Conference

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1 Introduction

Much of the research in computer science is published in conferences, often complex affairs including paper presentations, tutorials, workshops, invited speakers, and tours and entertainment. Even a small conference has a budget of tens of thousands of dollars, with much of the expenditure committed long before any income is seen. Yet the organisation of conferences is often undertaken by academics who, although keen to be hosts, have no experience in managing a business venture of this kind.

The two most important issues to be faced are setting and completing goals to a timeline and developing a realistic budget. We discuss these issues first, then consider the other aspects of successful conference organisation.

This document is available at www.cs.rmit.edu.au/~jz/conferences. A companion document, describing the particular structure of SIGIR conferences, is available at the same location.

2 Timeline

If a conference is to run successfully, a wide range of separate activities must be completed well in advance. For most conferences, the complete cycle is about two to four years. That is, the conference steering committee or professional society managing the conference series chooses in year $x - 3$ or so the hosts for the year x conference. Prior to this decision the intending hosts must prepare a bid and a draft budget. Assuming three years from decision to realisation, and a year of work prior to the decision to assemble the bid, the conference countdown is roughly as follows.

Year 1 Assemble a draft budget based on typical values for the big-ticket items: venue cost; attendance figures; per-attendee costs such as proceedings and banquet tickets; typical registration fee; and an overhead (of typically 25%–40%) for other costs (detailed below).

If on conservative attendance estimates the conference will lose money, you may want to secure sponsorship prior to making a bid — or consider not running the conference.

Note that there are several different types of attendee. The conference covers its costs from the registration fee of the full attendees. In addition, there are student registrations, typically at a fee that covers the marginal cost (that is, the cost to the organizers of having an additional attendee once there are enough full attendees to cover fixed costs such as room hire); and complementary registrations, for people who have given their time to the conference such as organizers, chairs, student volunteers, tutorial presenters, and so on. Some complementary registrations are in lieu of salary.

Think carefully also about how much support there will be from your local city, state, and country. Overall attendance may well be lower than usual if, for example, almost all attendees

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must undertake extensive travel to reach your proposed venue. Thus, while in some respects it is attractive to hold the conference at a resort rather than in a big city, the net effect may be to reduce attendance.

Given a draft budget you can assemble a bid. A bid consists of promotional material for the proposed city and information such as options for the conference location (university or hotel), how to travel to the city, exact dates for the conference, preliminary financial arrangements, and perhaps most importantly the names of the principals for organisation and program committees.

In many conferences, the bid is presented at a prior-year business session of that same conference series. It should be accompanied by a brief professional A/V presentation. A minimum is to use the 35mm transparencies available at most tourist offices, or to borrow some images from tourist web pages. (Your personal non-professional video or photographs are unlikely to achieve the same impact, and may well be remembered — unfavourably — for years afterwards.) Also try to arrange to have tourist brochures to distribute; tourism authorities and airlines are happy to provide these in large numbers. Brochures are also useful to have to hand when you attend the same conference in year $x - 1$, when your job is to persuade people to attend.

Year 1, month 12 The steering committee awards you the conference.

This is a good time to start maintenance of an exhaustive “to-do” list with dates, tasks, and responsibility. Use it as the basis of a monthly review meeting with the team helping you to run the conference.

Year 2 Start shopping. Many of the things you will need for the conference must be arranged more than two years ahead, or possibly even earlier.

- Venues should be booked. This includes conference rooms, banquet halls, and, if necessary, special-purpose accommodation.

Smaller meetings such as tutorials associated with the conference may well be held elsewhere; a large-event venue is often not effective for small events. In such cases, consider how the two venues will interact.

- Sponsorship decisions are often made well in advance of the date the money is spent. For academic institutions, it is commonplace for hosting departments (and departments at other nearby universities) to put in a few thousand dollars.

For commercial organisations, sponsorship may be paid from the advertising budget; this means that a commitment in the current financial year will probably be for the following financial year. Get sponsorship commitments in writing (if not in cash). At most organisations, staff change, management change, policies change, and budgets change. If you depend on the money to run the conference then make sure you can get hold of it when you need it.

- Academic publishers appreciate being able to set up a stand at a conference venue (and will pay for the privilege). However, their sales representatives often have full schedules, so advance warning is likely to be necessary.
- Make tentative arrangements with a printer to produce the proceedings. The earlier the printing is booked, the shorter the time required for the printing once the camera-ready copy actually arrives.

Some conferences use a regular or society printer, such as the ACM. If such a printer is to be used, it may be in another country, so check out the shipping schedules: found out how long the proceedings will take to print and how long it will take to get them from the printer to the conference.

To secure bookings you are likely to need money. Many academic institutions have a system of interest-free floats for conferences, and local professional organisations or chapters often have a policy of providing seed funding to significant conferences. Your government may also have such

schemes (although finding the right department can be a headache: it might be under science, education, tourism, or something else altogether).

If the conference is under the banner of a large professional organisation such as the ACM, the organisation may provide a float, or may even fully fund the conference in exchange for the profits. These profits are typically used to support the society, provide student support, and undertake community activity.

Note that most organisations that provide a float do so in exchange for agreements on financial reporting. Be prepared to have careful, detailed accounting of all expenditure.

The conference deadlines need to be fixed: dates for paper submission, paper acceptance, delivery of camera-ready copy, and so on. These deadlines need to be consistent with previous years, but are affected by details such as printer deadlines. At the same time, establish all the minor deadlines that the organizers must watch, such as dates for notification of attendance numbers to the venue and for payments of deposits.

Year 3 By the end of the year, and quite possibly earlier, your promotional material should be well-developed. The first promotional item to appear is usually the Call For Papers (CFP), which usually includes details of the location of the conference, important dates (submission, notification, the conference itself), topics of interest, and membership of organising and program committees. (If some details are difficult to nail down, an Advance CFP might appear.) Conference logos and posters are often developed around the same time.

The single best place to advertise a conference is at the same conference in previous years — hence the importance of having the CFP available at least a year in advance.

By the time the CFP appears there should be a conference web site, which will evolve dramatically as the conference date approaches. Initially it should contain information such as the CFP and pointers to any relevant web pages (conference host, local attractions, and so on).

CFPs are usually plain, perhaps a single sheet of A4 paper. A typical Call For Attendance (CFA) is rather more glossy, often involving pictures or photographs, as well as non-academic information such as accommodation options and local tours. Although the CFA won't appear until a few months before the conference, the necessary information-gathering process can be protracted. Also, since the layout is likely to involve the services of a professional designer, and since printing is in colour, production of the final CFA may take two or three months.

Consider what the final web page needs to contain, and plan when each part will be filled in. Typical contents includes the schedule; call-for-papers (which is useful as a topic description of the conference even when submissions have closed); call-for-attendance; registration; accommodation; program, including papers, posters, workshops, tutorials, and so on; sponsors; parent organisation; hosts; local information including travel and tourism; and past and future conferences in the series.

Year 4, month 4 Because of the delays inherent in production of the CFA, there may be more than one version. An initial version is required, say, six months before the conference, but this version cannot include the conference program. A version with the program can be distributed once camera-ready copy is received; and a final version, with the program but without the registration details, can be distributed to attendees as a conference guide.

Year 4, month 6 On-site arrangements need to be finalised. There is no substitute for personal visits to the facilities, putting yourself in the place of attendees and asking yourself whether the facilities are adequate, how easy is it to find your way around, and so on. Check the venue again: that rooms will be provided and configured as agreed in earlier negotiations, that there is space for coffee breaks, that there are obvious places for registration desks, and that the venue staff understand exactly what it is you expect of them.

Year 4, month 9 Conference organizers are often responsible for production of the printed conference proceedings, including assembling the front matter, assembling the papers with a table of contents, assembling an author index, and preparing a conference schedule with full paper

details. These are laborious tasks but are worth doing carefully and thoroughly. An author index, for example, makes the proceedings much more usable, and a detailed conference schedule (relating times to sessions to papers to page number in the proceedings) allows attendees to navigate your conference with minimal effort.

Planning for this task begins more than a year before the conference, but it is at this time (when the authors deliver their camera-ready copy) that several weeks of full-time work is required. Only when the copy arrives, for example, do you know how long each paper is or even whether the title and authorship is correct. Sometimes authors withdraw from the conference at this stage. Some authors need to be harassed (and don't hesitate to do it) to ensure that you have their paper in time; others need to be harassed to get their paper down to the agreed length. Note that it is poor policy to allow some authors to wheedle extra proceedings pages out of you. Such overlong papers will be noticed in the proceedings, and the authors who complied with the page limit will not be happy.

Year 4, month 11 At about this time you will have to confirm the details of the banquet and other meal arrangements, probably specifying menus and approximate numbers — which at this stage will still be broad guesses. Remember to allow for a range of dietary tastes, and agree with the caterers a foolproof mechanism that will ensure that the vegetarian (or kosher, halal, vegan, and so on) meals are delivered to the people who have requested them. Nothing is more frustrating to a vegetarian than being without a meal at a banquet because an omnivore on the other side of the room saw a server with it and said “that looks nice, can I have one of those meals please?” (And in the same vein, make sure that the vegetarian meal prepared by your caterers will be rather more nourishing than one of the standard meals sans the meat component. That is, all types of meals should be to the same standard.) Don't set aside “special” tables for vegetarians; it is insulting. Allow people to sit wherever they choose.

Year 4, month 12, week 3 The caterers for the various social events will now require final numbers.

Year 4, month 12, week 4 The conference itself. In a typical conference, it is only in this week that you will get the last 10%–30% of the registrations you need to balance your budget.

Expect to spend the week in a blur, solving small and large problems (arranging substitutes for tutorial presenters that missed their flights, apologising to authors for printing errors in the proceedings, locating weird computer connection cables, helping people with money conversion problems) and, sadly, you will probably attend relatively few of the conference sessions. But all going well, by the end of the week you will be tired but happy, and colleagues will have thanked you for a job well done.

Year 5, month 2 Once the dust has settled and you have received and paid all of your bills, you need to close your financial accounts and prepare a summary of how the conference eventually turned out. Forward copies of your summary to the society managing the conference series, and to all of the by-now-known organizers of future conferences in the series.

At the same time it is worth spending a day editing your web site for the final time, making it an archival record of what eventually transpired. Add links to the future conferences in the same series.

3 Budget

We hosted the 1998 Annual International ACM-SIGIR Conference on Research and Development in Information Retrieval (www.cs.mu.oz.au/sigir98) in Australia, with a little under 250 attendees. The final budget for this event, including associated tutorials and workshops, and two

excursions, is detailed in Figure 1. All of the amounts listed are Australian dollars, each of which at the time of the conference corresponded to¹ \$USD0.57.

The following headings were used in our budget.

Venue and hire This is a major item, and the only way you will be able to estimate how major is to talk to the event managers at some potential locations. Large hotels typically offer flat-floored ballrooms that can be split up into smaller rooms by openable doors; some might also have theaterettes within their premises. Our preference is for tiered lecture-style seating if available; if you are attracted by the ballroom option, be sure to sit at the back of the room during your inspection visit, to confirm that the screen will be comfortably viewable.

Don't forget to include in your rental agreement a nearby room for use as an on-site office for computer, printer, phone, and so on; and be sure that the nearby public spaces are also included, so that coffee breaks remain private to your conference attendees.

AV equipment hire is a cost that surprises many people. You will probably need to hire multiple data projectors, microphones, overhead projectors etc, and by the time delivery and setup costs are factored in, the total can be quite startling. The hotel will have a preferred supplier arrangement with either an in-house company, or some other company; they may or may not be the cheapest, and you should certainly explore alternatives for such a big budget item.

Add in a further allowance if you plan to provide Internet access at the venue; even more if you wish to go the whole hog and provide a temporary local-area wireless network. Attendees expect to have at least minimal access facilities and are disappointed if they are not provided.

Administration and management There are specialist companies that will run many aspects of a conference for you, saving you some headache. But there are two caveats. First, these companies can be expensive, taking as much as 20% of each full attendee's registration fee. In a tight budget such expense may be out of the question. Second, such organizers are not academics, which means that they are not familiar with the norms of academic conferences. It is our experience that they have to be fairly closely supervised. Conferences for business generally have far more expansive budgets than do academic conferences, and are organised over a much shorter space of time, and it is the former that the organizers are accustomed to.

The main tasks undertaken by the professional organizers are booking of venues, management of the banquet, gathering of information about hotels and tours, and processing of registrations. All of these tasks can be undertaken in-house by a competent administrative assistant, and three or six months of temporary administrative support for a person sitting just down the corridor from your office is almost certainly a better use of conference funds than a professional organizer. And using the web it is straightforward to process registrations. Our advice is to save the money, and not hire conference organizers.

In our SIGIR budget we also included all of the complementary registrations as an "expense" in this category. No money changed hands; nevertheless, provision of free registrations to student helpers, program committee chairs, invited speakers, and so on, is a definite cost that must be allowed for in the budget.

Printing There will be several minor costs to be added to the major cost of printing the proceedings, particularly if there are to be mailings of hardcopy versions of the Call for Papers or the Call for Attendance.

The detailed program guide also warrants considerable care and effort — your attendees will carry it all day for the best part of a week, and look at it dozens of times in search of information of one kind or another.

¹Although it is our experience, using the well-known "glass of beer and slice of pizza" test, that the purchasing power of the Australian and US dollars is much closer to numeric parity than is indicated by this conversion rate. Certainly academic salaries are approximately comparable, which is why Australians live on beer and pizza rather than wine and steak when attending conferences in north America and Europe.

EXPENDITURE		INCOME	
Venue and Hire		Registrations	
Rooms	\$9,350	Full (82×\$590)	\$48,380
Audio Visual	\$6,000	Member (104×\$490)	\$50,960
Telecommunications	\$761	Student (45×\$290)	\$13,050
Pinboards	\$730	Day (8×\$200)	\$1,600
Administration and Management		Sales	
Conference management	\$5,000	Proceedings (40×\$60)	\$2,400
Personnel	\$5,728	Dinner tickets (18×\$80)	\$1,440
Postage, copying, couriers	\$3,483	Tute notes, shirts, caps, etc	\$2,230
Complimentary registrations	\$15,891	Miscellaneous	
Printing		Floats	\$18,164
Artwork design	\$700	Sponsorship	\$19,942
Publicity – CFP, CFA	\$3,046	Late fee (41×\$100)	\$4,100
Program booklet	\$1,395	Publishers displays	\$1,997
Proceedings	\$4,460	Interest	\$1,270
Name cards	\$375	Other	\$206
Travel		Related Activities	
PC Chair America	\$1,397	Tutorial income (153×\$150)	\$22,950
PC Chair Europe	\$0	Workshop income (105×\$75)	\$7,875
PC Chair Australia	\$2,500	Excursions (49×\$80+16×\$30)	\$4,400
Keynote Speaker	\$5,209	Total Income	
Catering		\$200,964	
Coffee breaks (6×250)	\$8,492	CONFERENCE PROFIT	
Welcoming reception (220)	\$4,715	\$41,452	
Newcomers breakfast (90)	\$2,340		
Poster/Demo session (200)	\$6,420		
Banquet (200)	\$14,525		
Rialto admission (160)	\$800		
Chairs' dinner (21)	\$1,200		
Miscellaneous	\$511		
Distributables			
Satchels (280)	\$2,136		
Caps (80)	\$980		
T-shirts (40)	\$740		
Pens (300)	\$1,065		
Related Activities			
Tutorial costs (inc. venue)	\$16,625		
Workshop costs (inc. venue)	\$4,024		
Excursion costs	\$3,872		
Miscellaneous			
Repayment of floats	\$18,164		
Bank and credit card charges	\$4,543		
Paper prizes	\$1,500		
Registration refunds	\$835		
Total Expenditure	\$159,512		

Figure 1: Final budget for the 1998 Annual International ACM-SIGIR Conference on Research and Development in Information Retrieval. All amounts are in Australian dollars, which, at the time of the conference, was at a rate \$AUD1 = \$USD0.57.

Note that one area in which academic ability is no substitute for talent is design. We retained a professional artist to design many of our items, including a conference logo, the cover of the proceedings, the program booklet, the tee shirts, and so on. She earned her fees many times over.

Travel You need to include an allowance for keynote and other invited speakers. Our advice is that you agree a bottom-line amount that is to cover their travel and local costs, and then simply pay that sum. Let them economise inside that amount and pocket the difference if they wish, because the alternative is to find that someone has flown business class and is expecting full reimbursement.

In the case of SIGIR we also funded travel for two of the three regional Program Committee chairs to meet with the third, in order for the program to be finalised. Enquire early of the steering committee as to whether such expenditure is expected out of your conference budget.

Also worth checking with the steering committee at an early stage is whether or not your budget is expected to fund prizes of any sort.

Catering The formal presentations are the ostensible reasons that people attend conferences, but as we all know, the social events are also critically important, and can make or break your conference. You will probably be tied to the venue's preferred suppliers for coffee breaks and events held near the conference sessions, but they will offer a choice of service types, and people will be grateful if you provide juice as well as tea/coffee, and fruit and yogurt as well as biscuits.

Explore off-site locations for your main conference banquet and other smaller events. And think laterally: what other activity could be tied to your banquet to make for a memorable evening? Is there a special building — an art gallery, a museum, a riverboat — in your city that you might use?

One perennial decision concerns alcohol service. For example, alcohol might be paid for on an “as consumed” basis over an open bar; or by the person-hour for a certain range of available beverages. Be aware that the event supplier will assume the worst when calculating person-hour rates (perhaps a plumbers convention), and charge accordingly. So given that, with a few notable exceptions, academics are not heavy drinkers, paying for alcohol by consumption will almost certainly be cheaper than paying a fixed per-person rate.

The alternative is, of course, to require that alcohol be paid for by the people consuming it. But consider the impression this policy has on an attendee: the saving in your budget made by requesting people to pay for their own drinks is more than offset by the irritation at having paid to attend an event and then be faced with additional costs at the site. Even worse, the people who want to drink water or juice will also resent your cost-cutting — you can be sure that the hotel will charge exorbitant rates for non-alcoholic beverages too.

Distributables These include the conference bag or satchel, the program booklet or listing, tickets and badges, local information such as maps and restaurant guides, promotional literature from sponsors, and any giveaways.

Experienced conference-goers will also expect a list of attendees. It may be tempting to only make such a list available after the conference when the attendance is final; or to not publish a list at all. Our advice is the opposite: make two. A preliminary list should be part of the kit of distributables in every satchel, and a final list, with errors corrected, and late registrations included, should be available for collection on the last day of the conference. We have lost count of the number of times we have used such lists to trace people we met, or to arrange reviewing or academic visits at some later time. And when it does appear in the conference satchel, it is always the first document we read.

Related activities In the case of SIGIR there are usually associated activities. We were careful to budget these separately, including the room and AV hire, and the honorariums paid to the presenters. In planning your preliminary conference budget you should probably assume that these

activities are revenue neutral. Nevertheless, it is important to give such events every opportunity to make money: good scheduling is essential, for example.

Other The biggest item in this category was the credit card levies we incurred by allowing credit card payments, in our case at a rate of around 4% of each transaction. Credit cards are a fact of life and cannot be dispensed with, so don't forget to factor in the cost of this payment mechanism.

We also refunded a half-payment of the small number of advance registrations where we had been properly informed, and the cancellation was because of medical or other unforeseeable cause. In return for the half-payment that we retained, we mailed these people their copies of the proceedings.

And don't forget to budget for repayment of any float funding you may have received.

Income Income is simple compared to expenditure: it consists of registrations and sponsorship. There are typically two levels of registration, full and student, and possibly a late fee to encourage early registration, which helps you determine firm estimates of numbers.

Of these, only sponsorship can be known several months in advance. For this reason it is worth considerable effort during years two and three of your planning, writing letters, and approaching colleagues in industry or government. (This is a situation in which having one of those lists of attendees we mentioned earlier is useful.) An offer of public gratitude, some complementary registrations, and placement of logos in the publicity material, may be sufficient to bring a cheque for several thousand dollars.

Some sponsors seek academic credit in exchange for their money, such as naming rights at the poster session or an opportunity to speak in the technical sessions. Do not agree to such a request without approval from the steering committee — approval that is unlikely to be forthcoming.

Making a profit Many of these costs are essentially fixed, regardless of the number of attendees. Even though, for example, there is nominally one copy of the proceedings per attendee, in practice the proceedings must be printed and paid for well in advance of final attendance numbers being known.

As an obvious consequence of this fact, we urge you to be optimistic in your attendance numbers (that is, overestimate the likely attendance) when planning the “expenditure” side of your accounts, and pessimistic in your numbers (that is, underestimate attendance) when planning the “income” side of your budget. A neutral budget based upon such assumptions will then, hopefully, result in a profit showing through when you have paid all the bills after the conference.

Since there is surely no shame in making a profit and being able to return money to the coffers of the sponsoring society (who can be relied upon to use your surplus wisely, perhaps for funding student travel to future conferences, as was the case with our SIGIR'98 profits); so too there must surely be no shame in *planning* to make a profit. The only revenue neutral budget you should ever examine is the one just mentioned — with high attendance in terms of expenditure, and low attendance in terms of income — in order for registration fees to be set.

And a final reassurance: no matter how carefully you plan your budget, and no matter how carefully you monitor your cashflow, it is unlikely that you will be revenue positive until just a week or two prior to the conference, and perhaps not even until the first day. It is always like this.

4 Getting it right

Many other practical issues must be dealt with in the course of running a conference. Some of the more significant of these are as follows.

Choice of venue The venue needs to satisfy the standards and norms of previous years. If the conference is usually held in a major hotel, think of the impact on attendees when they find that your conference is in a reception centre. If the conference usually has slots for 40 or so technical

presentations, each with hundreds of attendees, but must run in three days, make sure the venue facilities can cope with large parallel sessions — and that at least one theatre is large enough for the plenary session.

In making a choice of venue, put yourself in the shoes of a conference attendee. How are you going to get meals? Are there good dining facilities for large numbers of people? If you are relying on nearby cafes for lunch, are they large enough to cope with a sudden deluge of clients? Are they open in the evening? Is the local environment safe and attractive? Are the hotel rooms at a good standard? Is there in-room internet access? Will the public areas of the building be congested when the conference is in progress? Are there places for people to meet and congregate, such as hotel lounges? Is there good public transport nearby? How will functions such as poster sessions operate?

Technical sessions Most conferences include several different types of technical sessions, such as tutorials, workshops, panels, posters, demonstrations, invited talks and plenary speeches, and the main event, the presentations of refereed papers. Each type of session has its own requirements. During the technical presentations, for example, in addition to standard projection equipment and a lapel microphone, you are likely to need radio “roaming” microphones for question time, a laser pointer, a laptop computer for speakers who cannot provide one, remote control for lighting, and expert assistance in the event of the inevitable equipment failure. Some speakers may have specific requirements, such as special-purpose equipment for presentations involving video or sound, so ensure that speakers have an opportunity to notify you of their needs.

The needs of poster sessions and demonstrations in particular often seem to be overlooked. Each demonstration has specific requirements, such as equipment, internet connection, and so on. Poster sessions require a surprising volume of floor area (because of the numbers of people milling around) in addition to substantial pinboards for the posters themselves. A four-foot by six-foot board may sound large, but it is barely enough for eight A3 sheets — a small poster by typical conference standards — and is almost certainly too small. As simple an oversight as failure to have pins in sufficient quantity can make the session a disaster; on the other hand, good catering including alcohol ensures that the session will be well-attended.

Hotels If the conference is to be held at a hotel, you will probably be invited to block-book rooms. In exchange for a block-booking, venue costs may be defrayed. However, in a city with a good range of accommodation options it is far from guaranteed that a large number of attendees will stay at the conference hotel, so this arrangement exposes the organizers to financial risk. However, even if the hotel has standard packages to offer, the management is likely to be prepared to bargain. Regard the hotel’s first offer as a commencement point for negotiations.

It is attractive to be able to advertise a range of accommodation options. For example, in 1998 the conference hotel was a member of the Accor group, which operates several chains of hotel at different price levels. The conference hotel was a five-star venue, but we were able to offer discount room rates at nearby three- and four-star venues. Exclusive arrangements are also likely to create ill-will amongst attendees, who would prefer to see a range of accommodation options on offer on your web site. For example, students prefer cheap accommodation (many stay at hostels), and people travelling as families require apartment-style accommodation.

Many hotels offer a “government” rate that is significantly below the standard accommodation rate. In exchange for your offering to include a hotel on a list of recommended accommodation options, the hotel may well be willing to offer you this rate (or even a cheaper rate if you argue hard enough). A few days spent visiting local hotels and meeting management can lead to significant cost reductions for your attendees. One of the major positives people can take away from a conference is a feeling of having been well looked after.

A common trap is that the so-called conference rate is actually greater than rates available via other booking mechanisms, or even worse, greater than the rate available to guests who simply walk up. Attendees always compare rates and are sure to be disgusted if they are being exploited by their hotel, and even more so if they find they are being gouged by the conference hotel.

Staffing and student volunteers Most of the labour required to run a conference can be provided to a good standard by student volunteers, who will readily staff a desk or provide AV support in exchange for free registration and perhaps a banquet ticket. Having a pool of “runners” available to you during the course of the conference can save you a great deal of difficulty. The low-level services that volunteers will undertake are not typically provided by professional conference managers. A consistent uniform for volunteers, even if it is only a tee-shirt or cap, allows attendees in search of information to identify local people.

Transport The majority of attendees will not have cars and will not be prepared to hire or drive in a foreign city. They are reliant on public transport, including courtesy transport provided by the hotel or by you. Take the time to prepare brochures explaining transport and other local facilities. Make sure that you understand the services offered by the conference hotel; and include information on how to get from the airport to the conference hotel on your website.

Special problems arise when the conference is to be held out of a major city, perhaps at a tourist venue or a remote university campus. Consider how the attendees will get to the venue, all within the same day or so, and also consider what they will do when they get there given that they won't have cars. An isolated university campus is an unattractive place to be stuck in the evening when nothing is open, or even during the day if the campus facilities are shut for the summer. Similar considerations apply to hotel venues. Attendees expect to have ready access to a range of facilities: banks, bookshops, pharmacies, cafes, supermarkets, fruiteries, and so on; and if these are not available, be very clear in your promotional literature as to the nature of the venue, and list accommodation options that do offer these facilities.

Mechanisms for promotion Develop a mailing list (physical and electronic) from past lists, by posting and asking for expressions of interest, and by combining lists of submittees and past attendees. When you have created your email list, ensure that only approved messages can be circulated to it; use it sparingly and sensibly. (And *please*, use proper email list management software, rather than a 500-line “To” header in your emails. At the very least, use “Bcc” rather than “Cc” or “To”, so that the list of addressees gets suppressed.)

Set up a web site and include a simple mechanism for people to add themselves to the mailing list. Get the web site linked to the sites of other related conferences and the society that oversees the conference sequence.

Scheduling the program Make sure that there is adequate time for lunch and breaks, especially if the nearby dining facilities are limited. In our experience 30 minutes is the minimum you should allow for coffee breaks (there is always a session somewhere in the program that will run 10 minutes late); and 90 minutes is the minimum for lunch. Even if people can physically find food and eat it inside 45 minutes, they will be grateful for the opportunity to take a walk outside in the sun, or to explore the local shops for another 45 minutes.

Consider finishing the program early on the final afternoon. Most of your attendees will be flying out within a 24 hour period that starts in the middle of your last afternoon, irrespective of when the scheduled sessions actually conclude. No speaker enjoys being a lame duck presenter at 5pm to a handful of remaining attendees.

Tours and trips One of the pleasures of attending a well-run conference is taking a local tour with a group of colleagues. If you do include a tour in the program, check it out carefully: many such tours are designed for social groups such as retirees and may not be appropriate for well-travelled academics. Consider something out of the ordinary or physically demanding — after a long plane ride many conference attendees appreciate the chance to stretch their legs. One possibility is to plan your own excursion with the assistance of a local bus company.

Attendees are grateful if good tourism information is available through the conference website. Standard tourism web pages (usually created by tour operators or civic authorities) often focus on shopping, nightclubs, and local “attractions” that — to a typical well-travelled academic —

just seem tacky. Use your local knowledge to assemble information that is appropriate for your colleagues, and take the opportunity to tell people the best things about your region.

Giveaways Entities such as tour operators, shopping malls, and local authorities are always keen for promotional opportunities. If you advise them that you are hosting a conference, they will provide you with free distributables for the conference satchels. These can be surprisingly generous.

Sponsors may be willing to pay for specific components of your costs, such as satchels, a banquet, or a facility such as an email room.

Follow the pattern In designing your conference — the number of days it will run, when it will run, what kind of facilities it will use — it is important to be mindful of conference tradition. Attendees will expect your conference to be much like that of previous years; substantial changes, even if well-intentioned, may bring criticism. For example, if there is usually a welcoming reception on the night prior to the conference, consider holding one when you run the conference. If you do change the usual pattern of a successful conference, be sure you have good reasons, and get the approval of the steering committee.

As one example of a nice touch, SIGIR has traditionally held a “newcomer’s breakfast” on the first morning of the conference, at which first-time attendees mingle with senior members of the community, including the program committee.

You will only understand these precedents if you have attended a number of conferences, and we believe that anyone planning to host a conference in year x should regard attendance at that conference in year $x - 1$ (and probably $x - 2$ too) as being mandatory, even if they have attended the conference a number of times already in years gone by. If funding for such attendance is problematic, consider including the costs within your year x budget.

Scams Academic conferences can be the target of attempted fraud, many of which follow established patterns. Some common types are as follows. (Thanks to Fabrizio Sebastiani for providing the material for the first two items below.)

The visa scam. Individuals, who are typically unknown to the scientific community, register for the conference using either a credit card that later turns out to be stolen, or an phoney bank transfer. These individuals are often from African countries. They then ask the organizers to send them an “invitation letter” that they need in order to apply for a visa. With a visa they can travel freely, and may disappear as soon as they have entered the country where the conference is being held.

It is not easy to identify such registrations. It may be that their assertion that they belong to a given organization is obviously false, such as the registration received at one conference from a person claiming to be an officer of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ghana, indicating as email address `MinistryOfForeignAffairsOfGhana@yahoo.com`; or that the organization they claim to belong (for example, a small company in Nigeria) is unlikely to be interested in having a representative participate in your conference. However, these hints are not conclusive; for example, some African universities do not have regular “.edu” addresses.

An approach is to send these people a letter in which you say that invitation letters are issued only, and without exception, after the registration money is in your bank account. This will deter many of them, but not all; some become extremely insistent and will escalate their requests. In some cases the registration fee will actually be paid. These are difficult cases, even if you suspect that these people will never come to the conference; after all, you may legitimately send such invitation letters, for example to authors who need a visa to enter your country. In these cases, we suggest being as cautious as possible in what you write, perhaps mentioning that you are issuing this letter only because this person has actually paid the registration fee, hinting that you do not know this person, and always mentioning that this “invitation” does not carry any obligation on your part other than giving this

person access to the facilities included in the conference registration. Keep in mind that your visa-issuing authorities may later hold you responsible if your letter can be construed as a personal invitation.

The refund scam. Individuals register for the conference using a credit card that later turns out to be stolen, then some days later seek a refund — because of some unforeseen incident — by means of a bank transfer. Naïve conference organizers have been cheated into refunding money they have not received and never will receive. Refund money only after you know you have received it, and do so by crediting the card through which the payment was issued; if this turns out to be stolen, even your payment of the refund will have no effect.

A policy that several conference organizers adopt is to issue any kind of refund only after the conference has ended to allow more time to detect whether the request for refund is legitimate. This policy should be clearly stated in the registration Web page.

The hotel kickback scam. Some conference hosts make the decision to use a firm of professional conference organizers, despite the concerns we list above. Such firms can generally be trusted to help the conference run smoothly in exchange for their fees, typically a fixed value per attendee. They may in addition assist attendees with travel and accommodation arrangements. However, some firms of conference organizers have permanent arrangements with particular hotels and tourism companies (such as bus day-tour operators), such as a fee-back to the organizers for, say, every night’s accommodation at the hotel provided to a conference attendee.

The drawbacks for your conference are obvious. Attendees may find themselves redirected to substandard hotels, while paying a premium rate — standard rates plus the fee-back — for their accommodation. Having made their bookings from overseas, the attendees may well be ignorant of what they are committing themselves to. Your contractual arrangements with the conference hotel may be compromised if attendees do not use it for their accommodation. Another issue is that the organisers may only pass a fraction of the “accommodation” costs to the hotel. The scale of such markup should not be underestimated. At one conference, it appeared that only 40% of the money taken by the firm of organizers for accommodation was passed onto the hotels.

The organizer scam. In a related problem, most firms of organizers offer to handle your registrations, and thus have control of your conference income, taking their cut before passing it on to you. If anything in their management of the conference is unsatisfactory, you will have little power to seek redress. In the worst case, they may keep your registration fees indefinitely, or claim that some payments were not made. An option is to require that payments be made directly to accounts controlled, say, by your university. However, the potential for such problems is a further reason to avoid using professional organizers. Most such firms are legitimate and reliable and will handle your money with probity; but in the event that your income is lost, the conference will be disaster.

5 Why do people do it?

Being organizer of a conference is a complex, demanding task that will take time away from other academic duties; and it does not carry the prestige of other academic roles such as program chair. But when you attend a conference you depend on the labour freely given by the organizers. For this single reason we believe that academics who regularly attend conferences have a definite obligation to run conferences in return. There will also be intangible benefits — people will be supportive of you in surprising ways. For example, when you need referees for a promotion application, think of including one of the “famous” invited speakers that you established a relationship with when they attended “your” conference. In short, we are confident that the goodwill you earn by running a successful conference will repay your efforts many times over.

Appendix: Lists

A to-do list could include the following (and in practice would include very much more):

- Develop complete timeline for conference.
- Book venue and functions.
- Book conference organizers.
- Prepare and distribute advance CFP, final CFP.
- Develop a budget.
- Construct physical and electronic mailing lists.
- Construct and promote conference web pages.
- Choose political and academic invited speakers.
- Identify sponsors and publishers for book display.
- Confirm dinner venues.
- Invite and confirm publishers.
- Confirm coach booking for dinner transportation.
- Arrange facilities for publishers inc. tables, chairs, pinboards.
- Arrange facilities for caterers and registration desk inc. tables and chairs.
- Invite advance CFPs from future conferences.
- Prepare and distribute printed CFA.
- Prepare front matter for proceedings.
- Prepare program booklet.
- Get preface for proceedings from program chairs.
- Circulate front matter to program chairs.
- Promote conference attendance by email, mail, news.
- Print certificates, write cheques for prizes.
- Assemble and deliver camera-ready copy.
- Contact invited speakers, make any special arrangements.
- Design conference logo.
- Send numbers to caterers for dinners and coffee breaks.
- Finalise registration list.
- Arrange parking for publishers.
- Arrange and (repeatedly!) confirm opening speakers.
- Obtain conference satchels, stuff satchels.
- Run AV course for student volunteers.
- Prepare conference venue.

At the conference venue necessary facilities include:

- Lecture halls.
- Tutorial rooms.
- Organizer's room.
- Appropriate audio-visual equipment.
- Staff that are experienced with the AV equipment.
- Notice boards.
- Stands for publishers.
- Coffee and tea in the breaks.
- Registration desk.
- Phone.
- Email facility.
- A printer for notices.
- Copies of any information sheets.

Satchel contents could include:

- CFAs, CFPs for allied conferences.
- Map of local area, including eateries.
- List of cafes and restaurants.
- How to use computing facilities.
- Facility list.
- Tourist information.
- Name badges and dinner tickets.
- Flyers from publishers.
- Freebies from promoters.
- Program booklet.
- Conference proceedings.