
Some Thoughts on the Open Letter

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Thanks for the opportunity to respond to these critical reflections, which are welcome and helpful for ESA to be able to engage in active discussion to improve its procedures, but also to share more widely about steps already taken. This open letter offers the chance to debate in more detail the often overlooked organisational aspects of the nitty-gritty of conference organisation, which are far more complex and multifaceted than what might be envisaged, but for that no less far reaching in their consequences.

When Sandro Cattacin, Chair of the Local Conference Committee (LOC) for the ESA 2011 conference in Lausanne came to Torino to share their experience with conference organisation (and hand on the next one to us), he started by describing the sleepless nights due to the great degree of uncertainty associated with attendance forecast and budget constraints (the figures on registered participants were terribly low until the actual closing day of registration, sometime in May, quite late in organisational terms to square the budget and avoid a potential economic loss). We knew very little by then about (this large) conference organisation and even less around what to expect from how submissions were linked to acceptance rates by different Research Networks (RN) and Research Streams (RS) and/or registration for the conference, and from how the composition of participants might change over time, and from the very behaviours of potential attendees (members and non-members, students and regular). We certainly could not afford an economic loss, and we started by committing ourselves to decreasing the degree of uncertainty and, to spare the next organisers a loss of sleep, by analysing and collecting empirical evidence (and by building a time series) from the documents of previous conferences. We started with the 2009 edition in Lisbon, the first of the 'very large' conference series, and by conducting repeated detailed data analyses of webpage usage, submissions, registrations, and their development over time, and we finished with the post-conference survey results and free field comments. We learned a lot from this exercise, which was handed on to Prague and pursued further on that occasion by monitoring the entire process and helping to inform the debate on improvements to future conference organisation by the ESA. This analytical exercise was indeed intended to reduce the degree of uncertainty around the budget (which should always be managed

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conservatively in the interest of ESA survival) in order to increase ESA leverage around the fee structure and the sustainability of measures targeted to support inclusion. The investments made by the latest two rounds of conference organising (LOC and Chairs) were aimed at promoting incremental learning in the organisation and capitalising on cumulated experience.

This disclosure serves to acknowledge the great effort that the ESA has already made in internally questioning and discussing changes in the organisational model since it was born as an association with smaller conferences managed within the academic community on a voluntary basis. Professional Conference Organisers (PCO) have been in charge of only some of the duties (registration and billing, hotels, signage, and some smaller operational tasks related to the catering and premises) as necessary, when the conference grew to be so big, but the scientific programme was, and still is, firmly in the ESA's hands. Changes began after the 2011 experience, when the PCO committed, but failed, to respond to the ESA's complex scientific organisation: sociologists, unlike medical conferences, have far more presenters among attendees and sessions to be managed, and a much wider array of academics are involved in the process of abstract evaluation and selection and of programme building (which is in the hands of the RN/RS and subject to change up to the very last minute).

But straight to the authors' critiques. It is my impression that the ESA has already begun to rethink the ways in which conferences are organised. It has done so through reflections, exchanges, and discussions within the Executive Committee(s), consultations with other, similar organisations and their practices (especially demographers, who have similar conference attendance and similar needs), but also by changing practices. The first change was a reshuffling of timing (a more compact session schedule and fewer options competing with regular sessions) and seeking more direct input from RNs in organising the Special Sessions, practices introduced since the 2013 event; then the schedule was moved from Wednesday to Friday to maximise attendance on the last conference day, a change introduced in 2015. Since 2013 an increasing emphasis has also been placed on environmental and social factors and sustainability.

Exclusivity. The ESA, unfortunately, does not have the capacity to counteract or address (alone) the dynamics of the general economy and the retrenchment of funding for research. It is also very difficult to cluster individual situations across so many countries and institutional settings in order to draw clear and consistent boundaries to define entitlement to support. For example, what defines an early career stage in Italy, in terms of access to funding, might be very different from what defines this stage in Turkey, the UK, Germany, or Finland. The different languages and contractual practices used by national research institutes are another barrier to equalising opportunities. Determining a set of rules that would try to address this (without causing even more segmentation) is a daunting task in itself, and trying to implement them might become very difficult and costly: any (necessary) certification of a certain status would have to be validated (by whom?)

against credentials provided by different institutions, in different languages, with unsustainable organisational costs.

These thoughts are some of many that came up in intense exchanges before the 2013 and 2015 conferences, which in Torino, under the Presidency of Pekka Sulkunen, resulted in the decision to provide very cheap accommodation to all participants on a non-discriminatory basis. Instead of discounted fees to some (difficult to trace) categories of participants, the ESA provided an even larger discount (in kind) on lodging (newly built students' accommodation on-site or in the city centre), as travel and lodging costs represent the larger share of expenses in conference participation. However, of the up to 1200 places offered, less than 350 were finally used, with some surprises in the coverage of use by country: attendees from the UK, Germany, Italy, France, The Netherlands, the USA, Canada, Finland, Belgium, Israel, Austria, and Switzerland made up 50% of the residence occupancy, while around 40% were attendees from Poland, Turkey, Spain, Portugal, The Russian Federation, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Estonia, Ireland, Greece, Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia. This suggests again how the issue of which characteristics (younger or more experienced researchers, from which country) to prioritise for supporting inclusion is a rather complex one.

Two new measures were introduced by the Executive Committee in 2015, under the presidency of Carmen Leccardi. The ESA allocated support for conference participation to increase accessibility for graduate students and junior scholars: a series of 74 'junior scholar grants' were established by the ESA and awarded by RNs (two each) to recently graduated scholars (students or graduates after 2010). The ESA also financed a reduction in ESA membership fees (which in turn granted a reduced conference fee) for those scholars who came from poorer countries, had their abstract accepted in Prague, and had been awarded their PhD within the last ten years. The message accompanying the latter measure read: 'ESA realises that there are other people who may not fall into this category who are also facing financial difficulty. To help with this we have ensured that there is low cost accommodation available. We also realise that some countries may be characterised by greater pressures than others. However, having considered a range of feasible options we think that this is the fairest and most practical response to these issues.'

It is around the conference fees structure, in turn a function of the composition of attendees, that the ESA can trigger a redistributive policy, which is something done by making an adjustment between Band 1 and 2 countries (restored after Geneva). It must be noted that the average fee paid by attendees has not increased, and has even slightly decreased, over time (and it is in line with other large conferences): from 242 EUR in Geneva 2011, to 226 EUR in Torino 2013, and 232 EUR in Prague 2015. However, if redistribution is to be pursued, either through ad-hoc measures and/or through the fee structure, it is unavoidable that the fees for some groups (faculties from Band 1 countries) are set larger than those for other participants (students and delegates from Band 2 countries). It is

a daunting task to design a group that is inclusive of (differently placed) early career researchers when the types of contractual relationships and their conditions are so different across countries, and when periods of intermittent or short-term employment can last for a very long time before permanent inclusion is achieved. Until tenure is reached there may (or may not) be entitlement to a reimbursement when funds are provided: in Italy and Spain, for example, tenure is rarely obtained before the age of 40 and often well after that, but tenured employment alone does not suffice to secure access to funding opportunities.

All in all, for what has been in place most recently, the ESA has already introduced several redistributive measures: one directed at discounted lodging open to all participants (the value of which is probably beyond that of any discount in fees, over the three days), plus two measures tailored to specific groups of attendees (in 2015); in addition, before and after 2011, there has been significant subsidisation of both student rates (incorporated into the fee structure), who are a large and increasing part of attendees, and of participants from weaker economies (Band 2 countries).

The conference dinner. This again depends on the city hosting the conference, but there are usually not many places that have the required capacity (subject to change until quite late in registration) available and able to provide a guarantee of experience and successful and smooth organisation and that can afford the security measures that are required by law and the insurance policy covering participants at the conference and its events. These places tend to ask for a commercial rate, in a regime of 'quasi-monopoly' that weakens any bargaining position. There are, however, many more occasions for informal exchange over the three days (lunches, coffee breaks, sessions, all the other evenings and alternative events), beyond the conference dinner.

Media coverage. This changes from one conference to the next and depends also on the interest of the local and national press. In Torino press coverage was quite substantial for an academic event (both local and national news and national newspapers). Furthermore, a remarkable initiative under the presidency of Pekka Sulkunen was pursued in trying to organise an international press conference for journalists (invited by the ESA). This, however, did not take off, not just because of the financial cost, but also because of the poor response from journalists.

Further events involving the larger public. This might imply a further organisational step in an already extremely demanding task, and one in which the energy and time of local engaged sociologists would be very welcome indeed. Although foremost a scientific event, ESA conferences could become fertile ground for these initiatives if members felt it was time for it, but this would require intense involvement 'on site' in the preparations and would require advertising: how to advertise the events and to whom? Which interested stakeholders and citizens would be willing and free to come during working hours on a workday (or holiday) and which topics would they be interested in discussing? In devising this series of events, potential speakers should be invited to contribute. Firstly,

they would have to be selected, contacted, and organised in response to demands emerging bottom-up, locally, rather than top-down (from the ESA itself). Secondly, logistics for all speakers and insurance coverage for all (non-registered) participants should be granted, spaces organised, and a fair selection of topics of interest and speakers secured.

Social responsibility. This was a concept firstly proposed by the Torino LOC team and it was included in the process of organising the conference (beyond its theme) in 2011 (<http://www.esa11thconference.eu/the-conference/concept>). In its original form this concept affected the choice of caterer (a training programme for prison inmates), but also all the other organisational aspects: the T-shirts for volunteers and the conference bags were made from local cotton and printed by disabled workers; the content of the bags was chosen to minimise environmental impact in terms of both materials and items; the provision of services included the provision of tap water available throughout the premises (and the distribution of compostable water bottles) and only locally grown, seasonal food; plastic and paper were minimised; the conference programme was available on demand at a symbolic price (before the Torino conference it had been offered free to every attendee), while printing facilities were offered on the campus free of charge; entertainment was provided by non-professionals, to whom a donation (violins for a music training project in schools in poor neighbourhoods) was made, and a childcare service was made available on demand. Childcare proved the most difficult bit to achieve, because of the need for professional and experienced child-minders (regular childcare teachers) for an uncertain number of potential users of different ages, languages, and needs, over different timing, and with extremely strict regulations applying to the spaces deemed suitable for children's access and use. Finally, in the Torino edition, like in Prague, leftovers from the coffee breaks and lunches were given away to shelters. Furthermore, some of the unsold books on display were donated by editors to the library on campus for the enjoyment and benefit of local students.

It is an ESA tradition to use volunteers (mostly students granted access to the conference), and in Torino the innovative use of voluntary citizens was introduced, which increased the participation and outreach to the general public. All these, both in Torino and Prague, were initiatives taken at the local level, seconded and welcomed by ESA Executive Committees, which always proved very open and responsive to local initiatives and demands by its members whenever feasible, but they are not properly ESA policy. We hope the next LOC can pursue and improve on these initiatives, in conformity with their resources and national contexts, or even for this to become a characteristic trait of ESA conferences for the future.

Outsourcing to PCOs. ESA conference organisation is not entirely outsourced, but is instead strongly in the hands of academics from the LOC, under the supervision and guidance of the Conference Committee and more generally the Executive within the ESA. The degree of outsourcing may vary slightly from

one conference to the next, depending on local circumstances, and might increase in the future, but the direction is already that of progressive internalisation over time. As always, there are trade-offs in any complex system involving multiple actors and their—sometimes conflicting—interests: ESA, LOC, PCO, conference participants (among them ESA members and other non-members). Professional Conference Organisers (PCO) are those best suited to prevent the risk that services might not meet the standards required, and they are able to provide insurance coverage, pursue billing, keep track of (changes in) registrations, provide accommodation when required, contract services, and meet given regulations in very heterogeneous national and local legislative settings. The LOC, based on site within the local networks, culture, and language, is best suited to oversee and handle the uncertainty regarding the number (and composition) of attendees, an uncertainty that remains until very late in the organisational process (when the commitment to services has already been made), and to have control over the services, choice of locations, and budget (i.e. on PCO), which makes it the best-positioned link between the ESA and all the other actors involved. The ESA, on the other side, has to meet its statutory goals and take charge of the scientific programme, and it can intervene on matters of both the fee structure and the most suitable choice of location (and LOC), but , but it would require a much greater organisational structure to be able to efficiently internalise more of the conference preparation and its many tasks and responsibilities.

Managing the entire process centrally would offer more control over the budget and the organisational process, but it would entail a far greater workload and higher personnel costs to hire trained and specialised person(s) only around ‘peak times’ every two years (both abstract handling and registration can be very burdensome tasks that continue over several months, December to August, every second year). The main risk would be to find, train, and grant continuity for several extra units of personnel that would operate in Paris, some of whom only on an intermittent basis. But ‘internal’ central management could also give rise to new uncertainties and weaken local control (networks, regulations, logistics, firms providing services, assuring standards and quality, visiting premises, negotiating products and rates). Most importantly, internalising registration might also result in a decrease in the space left for a PCO and make it difficult to find a good and reliable partner, locally, with so little margin for profit. PCOs are very reluctant to give up the registration part of the process, and even more so to give up the internal software they have for doing this.

The software choice is a tricky bit in conference organisation because the ESA requires reliable software for the scientific programme (abstract selection), but PCOs (who usually work with large medical conferences, on much larger budgets and with far fewer presenters for the same number of attendees) cannot offer reliable software for this stage and generally refuse to adopt different software for registration. Each PCO relies on their own internal software version, which their personnel are trained to use, for which they already have long-term

leases in place, and which also performs other billing and internal budgeting tasks in relation to the PCO's more general organisation of providers and personnel across different events. In Torino the technical synchronisation (of registered participants and their scientific contributions) of software platforms (a property-free newly built software for the scope of the conference and the PCO's own software) was achieved smoothly, but delays persisted in the updating of information on registrations by the PCO in Rome, which were reflected in some organisational challenges with the timely closing of the scientific programme. In Prague the synchronisation of platforms (ConfTool in use by LOC and own PCO software) was achieved 'manually' (record by record) by LOC. ConfTool was appreciated by RNs and attendees and proved to work well, although it is not (yet) suitable for automatic matching with PCO software (which is no longer required if registration is being done by ESA in Paris through the same software), though it was complex for the administrator to operate (but the personnel in the company are very helpful and responsive), and it would require some retailoring to adapt to ESA needs (especially joint RN sessions) for the next conferences.

Finally, it might also be mentioned that the organisation of ESA conferences is not undertaken by professionals but by (untrained) academic faculties on top of their (often unchanged) usual duties, on a voluntary basis, with passion and dedication, and in ever changing contexts as a result of the heterogeneous national regulations and practices. Organisers try their very best and are motivated (they invest well over one full-time year of their scientific career in this enterprise and put their own departmental budget at stake as well as the ESA's). However, they are not trained like event organisers on every aspect (software, communication, design, logistics, laws and regulations, provision of services, billing, etc.) and they learn by doing and facing (not a few!) challenges. Local organisers are assisted by the ESA Executive Committee (the composition of which changes every two years) and by a wonderfully efficient (but often solitary) unit of personnel among the ESA's permanent staff, who are also in charge of the management of all other ESA administration and membership duties.

In this (learning) process the ESA Executive and previous experiences, together with suggestions by attendees, can make a real difference in improving practices over time.

With appreciation for your reflections and contributions, I wish the ESA and Athens a LOC dream-team and future excited and engaged participants like the ones in Prague!