

# Suggested conference session formats

## ● Panel sessions

### Suggested session format

Panel sessions usually involve up to five panellists commenting on a specific topic or challenge, in a discussion moderated by a session chair. Since they are more open and interactive than a papers session, they are especially good for a problem-oriented approach to a topic which encourages panellists to take different perspectives, offer different solutions and generally open out the topic.

A panel session is usually organised by one or two organisers, one of whom will act as panel moderator/chair at the conference.

For a session length of 100 minutes (1 hour 40 minutes), the following formats might be considered by session organisers:

- *Panel discussion:* A panel of two to five people with a moderator/chair. An ideal number is three or four as it encourages the most interaction and engagement between panellists and the audience.
- *Authors meets critics:* An opportunity for two or three panellists to discuss a written work of one or more authors on a particular topic. A single monograph or 2-3 published papers might be discussed by the panel.

### Session structure

Consider how the panel session will run on the day – this should be decided in advance to allow panellists to prepare. Some options are:

- A brief presentation (not more than 5 minutes) from each panellist on the main question/topic, followed by questions from the chair and then from the audience
- A introduction piece from the chair or someone not on the panel, ideally thought-provoking or inspiring followed by a response from each panellist and then followed by questions

- Launching straight into panel discussion, by having the chair ask a few key questions around the topic, then opening it up to the audience for more questions.

### Preparing the session

Panellists are usually invited directly by session organisers, so a Call for Papers/Panellists is only rarely made public. However, you could consider inviting conference delegates to submit panel questions in advance, partly to help the panel prepare, and also to ensure the session is on what the audience is interesting in hearing.

Inviting panellists directly allows organisers to have control over the make-up of the panel and the expertise/views included – it is important to invite panellists with a wide range of views and approaches.

In addition, inviting panellists with a range of backgrounds, e.g. academia, policy, practice, end-user will provide a strong starting platform for different viewpoints. Consider inviting panellists for whom the topic is not their specialism, but whose background might offer a new view.

Organisers should prepare a brief title and abstract for their session, as panellists need to understand the format and goals of the session in order to prepare their contribution. Before the conference, the session organisers might ask the panellists to provide a short summary of their thoughts on the session's topic or challenge, but even better would be a short conference call (e.g. via Skype) that allows panellists to meet each other, chat and understand the main goals of the panel sessions from the organisers.

### Running the session on the day

Some hints and tips for running the session and moderating the panel discussion are:

- Briefly explain the panel format to the audience, especially how they can take part in the discussion.



- Don't spend too much time introducing panellists or the topic – the session abstract and panellists' biographical information can be included in the conference programme.
- Make sure everyone can be heard – this might mean having a microphone for each speaker and the audience. Seat the panellists in such a way that they can see the audience AND each other – eye contact makes for good discussion. Don't forget to allow panellists to ask questions of each other and of the audience!

Most importantly, a panel session needs a strong chair/moderator. It's important that they have experience facilitating discussion, knowing when and how to cut some people off, and when to encourage more from others. They need to be prepared to create a balance between the panel's views and the audience's questions, keep panellists on topic, and on time.