

SSAG Conferences: A pocket guide for academic-turned-organisers

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INTRODUCTION

The Society of South African Geographers aim to enhance the growth of society members and the discipline through, amongst others, a biennial Academic Conference and annual Student Conference and as stated in article 2 of its constitution and by-laws (SSAG Constitution and By-Laws, n.d.):

“Its objective is to advance the research and educational activities of all South African geographers by collectively representing the interests of South African geographers regionally, nationally and internationally; encouraging and supporting high quality research and teaching in Geography; providing a national geographic information resource for geographers and interested groups; and stimulating awareness of geographic and environmental matters through academic collaboration with other intellectual communities and accountable interaction with the public at large.”

The organising of these conferences rotate between South African Universities, i.e. academic staff with little time and no training in conference organisation. Not all academic societies can afford professional conference planners, and despite a repeated process annually/biennially, along with the immense time and effort that goes into its organisation, there are few guidelines available to aid the academic-turned-organiser in conference planning. Conference guidelines, or lack thereof, can have several intended and unintended outcomes (Favaro et al., 2016; Sardelis & Drew, 2016). This could include a biased focus on conference content, structure or approach, linked to the organisers’ past experience, subject, gender, or industry bias (Favaro et al., 2016). Each academic society has its own traditions and expectations for its conferences, yet, for the usually new-young-(er)-academic-turned-organiser, these are not always known.

It is within this context and from the experiences of planning – without a guideline – the most recent SSAG conferences, *SSAG2018*, that the need to provide a guideline to conference organising is realised. This guideline is presented in three formats: (1) an overview of the key organisational aspects, with relevant editable templates in an online resource; and (2) a theme-based time-lined to-do list; and (3) a list of items, specific to the SSAG Academic and Student conferences, is provided for consideration in future events. This guideline is part of a general

overview (link) and reflection (Pretorius & Rudolph, 2019) of the SSAG2018, and should be read in conjunction with these other two documents.

Perspectives on Conference Planning

There are three broad approaches in events planning (Caffarella & Daffron, 2013): (1) traditional; (2) practical; and (3) radical. In the traditional approach, one has a ‘step-by-step playbook’ that is ‘for the most part ... foolproof.’ (Caffarella & Daffron, 2013: 10). The planning process is perceived to be linear and others can use the same approach in similar settings, with little modifications. In contrast, the practical approach acknowledges the complexity of planning and that during this process ‘the best and worst of human nature is on display, surprises occur, dilemmas arise, decisions are made, and relationships are forced and strained.’ (Caffarella & Daffron, 2013: 12). The radical approach focuses on social activism and transformation. In hindsight, the organising committee (OC) of *SSAG2018* used Caffarella and Daffron’s (2013) first two approaches, although not deliberately and certainly not from existing guides.

Caffarella and Daffron (2013) offers a six-month time-lined to-do list (pp. 350-351) and a detailed checklist for planning conferences (pp. 371-374) as a combination of the traditional and practical approaches. These cover the following aspects: (1) discerning the context; (2) ideas and needs identification and prioritisation; (3) defining goals and objectives for the conference; (4) building a support base (involving participants, sponsors, organisational and external support that drive the process); (5) preparing and managing the budget; (6) designing the conference programme and planning its details; (7) setting the format, schedule, and responsible staff/stakeholders; (8) marketing the conference; (9) planning for the details; and (10) formulating evaluation/feedback forms. Caffarella and Daffron’s (2013) interactive model of programme planning is based on various assumptions, some of which are that:

- learning and change should be the focus of educational programmes (conferences);
- the planning process is really about building relationships; since,
- planners work in different ways; and
- planners are themselves merely learners that work hard to ‘bring together diverse players and pieces in a harmonious and balanced effort, most of the time.’ (Caffarella & Daffron, 2013: 35)

The guidelines presented here covers the ten aspects relevant to the traditional and practical approaches of (conference) planning, as identified by Caffarella and Daffron (2013), and is aligned with the assumptions of their planning guide.

PLANNING GUIDELINE

Outlined below is a guideline for various aspects of the planning process, supplemented by editable templates, linked to this online resource (see table 1 for a summary of available material found at <http://www.ssag.co.za/supplementary-material/>).

Table 1: A summary of material available in the online resource, A=Academic; S=Student Conference.

Item	Purpose	Format
<i>To-do list</i>	editable template	.xlsx
<i>Budget (A&S)</i>	editable template	.xlsx
<i>Invoice</i>	editable template	.xlsx
<i>Registration lists (A&S)</i>	editable template	.xlsx
<i>Poster A0 Landscape</i>	editable template	.pub
<i>Poster A0 Portrait</i>	editable template	.pub
<i>Abstract Acceptance Letter</i>	editable template	.doc

Administration and Communication

Start by setting-up a dedicated e-mail address (through your institution or Google mail) and conference website to publish announcements and important information. Several open source web-design software are available and easy to use (such as Wordpress and Wixsite), most of them have free templates, but some also have customised templates available at reasonable prices. The more information that is published upfront, the less queries will need to be dealt with later on.

For abstract submissions and registration –go electronic! Benefits of an online system include fast, easy registration; automated confirmation emails (reducing workload for the organisers); real-time updates and record keeping in a database; a record of online, secure data submissions (i.e. nothing gets lost). Although it does not mean paperless conference planning, it does reduce the amount of paper which is beneficial for the environment (Active Network, 2014). If these features are not included in the website template, customized forms can easily be created with Google -Forms, -Sheets and mail-merge plug-ins.

Keep registration and abstract submission a one-step process. Meaning, collect all the information you will need from a delegate, when they submit an abstract. The less the delegates need to interact with the system, the less room for error. Use the final payment then as confirmation of attendance. If the delegate is aware that ‘no payment’ means ‘no participation’, attendance numbers may be finalised by simply looking at the bank account. For this to be effective, however, the budget and schedule needs to be finalised before delegates can submit their abstracts – in order to allow them to also register for the conference events. A list of

suggested essential ‘personal information’ required for Academic and Student registration is included in the online resource.

Participants will need acceptance letters and/or proof of registration for various reasons (funding, leave, visas etc.) and should display, at the least, the following information:

- Conference:
 - Logo, location, dates, contact details
- Delegate:
 - Title, initials, name and surname, institution
 - Abstract title, type of work (oral/poster/keynote), time/date of presentation, suggested corrections (if applicable)

Communicate these in advance and ensure all finer details and logistics, e.g. programme, starting times and venues, are passed on to delegates ideally a month, but no later than two weeks, before the conference – it serves as a reminder of its approach, and you avoid a sudden influx of queries the week before.

It is the delegate’s responsibility to ensure they are informed, but the onus rest on the OC to distribute correct, concise information in a timely manner. To overcome potential miscommunication, it is advisable to share important information with the Society Council from early on to discuss potential challenges. Word-of-mouth remains the most powerful carrier for new or complex information, and since they represent a contingent of institutions who make up the Society membership, they could ratify the OC’s message on their behalf. Regarding the Student Conference, aim to communicate with the student coordinators of each institution from early on and encourage them to inform their students about the registration process, to keep them from directing queries to the OC.

Dates and Deadlines

Consider the timing of other conferences, especially bigger meetings, that may affect the attendance of delegates. Also consider events in the hosting city, e.g. festivals, which may affect accommodation availability. When planning a student conference, consider their academic schedule (i.e. progress of research projects) and the aim of the conference.

Since deadlines are generally poorly adhered to, it forces the OC to push back their own planning timelines, which is not always ideal or possible. Thus, it is suggested to plan a timeline to suit an ideal administration process, whilst leaving a generous buffer for extension as

contingency. Remind participants continuously of approaching deadlines, rather than settling for later dates that suits an academic or institutional calendar. This applies to both abstract submissions and registrations. Delayed payments are inevitable, since a large proportion of delegates pay via their institutional financial office, so consider this too when planning. Again, a one-step registration process may eliminate some of these issues.

Attendance

There is little more an OC can do to increase attendance, other than communicate early and advertise widely. However, the society as a body should look at the representation of institutions (and the sub-disciplines seated within them) and critically assess the reasons for their attendance of, or absence from conferences. This may be linked to sheer numbers, institutional budgets or past (in)experience of society conferences. Answers to these will help formulate the purpose, and in turn planning of a conference.

Venue(s) and Catering

A venue (an auditorium) that can host the entire delegation for keynotes/opening ceremonies, and (three-five) breakaway rooms for parallel sessions that can host at least 20-40 people at a time is ideal. Some sessions are more popular than others are, and if expected, make use of the auditorium for such sessions. Label doors of breakaway rooms clearly as ‘entrance’ and ‘exit’ (if possible) to prevent disturbances during presentations.

An open space for tea-time and a lunch venue walking distance away allows time for people to mingle and meet – but, be wary of noise pollution of these spaces to session venues. If the programme makes provision for posters, make sure the room it will be displayed in is easily visible and if possible, have the posters up for the entire conference. It allows for greater research exposure and will help stimulate conversation around the tea table.

Consider delegate access and parking, a map or directions to venues will be useful.

Establish the ability of the caterer to provide for special diets. Give delegates a set list to choose from, instead of an ‘open-ended’ answer. It is helpful to state up-front what the service provider will cater for, for example that ‘only health and religious dietary requirements will be considered’. Otherwise a very lengthy menu might have to be prepared. Caterers, by standard, usually avoid allergy products (nuts, seafood etc.).

Finances

The aim of the conference determines the budget. Previous expense sheets may be requested from the society. It is best to open a dedicated bank account, independent from society or

institution, which can be administered by the OC. Consider a post-conference audit as part of handing over to the next organisers. A list of common expenditure and a budget is included in the online resource.

Generally, a society does not aim to make a profit; therefore, total expense can be relieved by aid from various sponsors of choice (based on the purpose of the conference). Society members can be charged cost price and students can be subsidised (through funding) to encourage participation. However, if there is little funding available to cover student costs, the deficit can come from full-member registration. It may be helpful to prepare different sponsorship packages should potential sponsors request this information or negotiate benefits. Draft sponsorship letters, detailing the background and purpose of the conference, and motivating why sponsorship is needed. Note that, since keynote/guest speakers are invited guests, they are generally sponsored to attend.

Participants will need an invoice to make payments or claim from their institutions. A template is available in the online resource. A list of essential information to be displayed on the invoice is:

- The words ‘Tax invoice’
- Conference logo, dates, account details, VAT number (if it is non-profit, no VAT number is needed)
- Hosting institution physical address, contact details
- Invoiced name, address, contact number, VAT number, order number
- Unique invoice number, date invoiced

Enforce an administration fee or state the ‘no-refund policy’ to ensure no losses are made. Early withdrawals and last minute cancellations are unfortunate, but common. Remember - payments will come in slow.

Programme

The outline of the programme is dependent on the format of the conference, but some basic aspects are common. Most delegates walk from guesthouses, which serves breakfast from 07:00, thus 08:00 is too rushed, and participants tend to be late (they stroll and talk to their colleagues along the way). Tea breaks can be 15-20 minutes and lunch an hour (this will include a brief walk to another venue if applicable). The attention span of the audience is about 20 minutes. Keep this in mind when planning sessions and keynote/plenary lectures. An excursion can be anything from a few hours to multiple days, whereas the writing workshop usually takes

¾ of a day. Make sure to publish a draft programme in advance for delegates to secure their travel arrangements.

Upon arrival delegates traditionally receive the following:

- name tags (or some form of identification)
- programme booklet with conference dates, presenting times, venues
- book of abstracts with contact details of participants,
- copy of published proceedings (if available)
- a bag, notebook and pen are not required, but often expected

Do all printing as late as possible (programme booklet, name tags etc). It is common to have last minute additions, or withdrawals from the programme within a week before the event.

Proceedings

If you aim to publish conference proceedings, it is effective to finalise the submission and reviewing process prior to the conference, but not publish the final version until after. Papers are often withdrawn or added until the last day, thus, if published before the conference, the proceedings will not reflect the true programme. Instead, publishing after conclusion of the conference will allow authors a few final edits or additions based on feedback during sessions.

The reviewing and editing process can be tedious, so construct a few specifications to authors (and reviewers) to facilitate the process:

- Administrative:
 - timeline – deadlines for submissions and reviews
 - procedure for submission and review
 - papers per author
- Structure and Format:
 - length of manuscripts – including or excluding figures, references, tables, footnotes
 - format – specify the (journal) guidelines & instructions to authors

The final proceedings can be published either by the hosting institution's publishing house, or the society's journal -they may be willing to facilitate the reviewing process also. Once a paper has been accepted, the editor (OC) has to compile the reviewer's feedback reports and a formal acceptance letter to send to the author(s) along with a copy of the conference programme and published proceedings. These documents should essentially present the following information:

- Author(s):
 - acceptance letter, the reviewers' feedback form, page numbers of article, conference programme showing inclusion of paper
- Proceedings:
 - title page, foreword, ISBN number, table of contents

Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

Continuing Professional Development encompasses lifelong learning, staff development, continuing professional education and adult education (Healy, 2003; Ryan, 2003). It is increasingly important to register as conferences for CPD, since it plays an important part in a number of professions and can be seen as a hallmark of professional regulation (Kolenc Kolnik, 2010; Mulvey, 2012). Further, a growing number of the delegation belong to various professional scientific bodies and CPD not only incentivises attendance, but it corroborates conferences as a means of adult education and empowers scientific societies to play a part in this.

The registration procedure for CPD accreditation is dependent on, and specific to, the professional bodies associated with delegates attending the conference. Once delegates indicate which professional body(-ies) they belong to e.g. ESRI, SACNASP and SACPLAN, during the conference abstract submission and registration process, the OC can decide to justify the CPD registration process (and costs incurred).

If accredited as a CPD event, it will be the OC's responsibility to facilitate the process for delegates to claim their CPD points. Delegates should sign a register for each day attended, and along with a programme that proves their participation, this should be sent to the respective professional body. The attendance register should contain the following information:

- Event detail: location, organisers, date, event CPD number (issued by the professional body)
- Delegate information: name, surname, signature, professional registration number

TO-DO LIST

The to-do list presented in table 2, is task-focused rather than time-line focused, and covers all of the aspects highlighted in Caffarella and Daffron's (2013) version. Different to Caffarella and Daffron's (2013) list, the timeline has been extended to 12 months to make provision for an OC that are of full-time academics. The list is available online as an editable spreadsheet (visit <http://www.ssag.co.za/supplementary-material/>).

Table 2: A theme based to-do list to guide conference planning and administration.

Theme	Item	Deadline	
<i>Vision</i>	Programme	ongoing	
	Theme / Mission	18 months prior	
	Format	18 months prior	
	Purpose/Vision	18 months prior	
	Dates & Deadlines	12 months prior	
<i>Dates & Deadlines</i>	Invitation	12 months prior	
	Call for Sessions	10 months prior	
	Registration (open/close)	3 months prior	
	Payment (open/close)	3 months prior	
	Proceeding Submission	4 months prior	
	Call for Abstracts	5 months prior	
<i>Venues & Catering</i>	Opening	10 months prior	
	Conference	10 months prior	
	Meals / Tea	10 months prior	
	Gala Dinner	10 months prior	
	Caterer	10 months prior	
	Other Events	3 months prior	
<i>Finances</i>	Budget	12 months prior	
	Bank Account	12 months prior	
	Invoicing System	8 months prior	
<i>Funding</i>	Letters & Application	12 months prior	
<i>Admin</i>	Key Notes	12 months prior	
	Email Address	12 months prior	
	Website	8 months prior	
	CPD Registration	8 months prior	
	Marketing	8 months prior	
	Google Form	7 months prior	
	Compile Sessions	6 months prior	
	Abstracts Review	4 months prior	
	Programme & Booklet	2 months prior	
	Printing	1 month prior	
	<i>Proceedings</i>	ISBN for Proceedings	6 months prior
		Writing Workshop	6 months prior
	<i>Programme</i>	Excursions	6 months prior
		Council & BGM Meeting	6 months prior
Public Lectures		3 months prior	
Entertainment		2 months prior	

SSAG SPECIFIC ITEMS

Following is an overview of items commonly scheduled into the SSAG conferences. These items are not explicitly outlined in the Society's Constitution, but rather have been incorporated over the years, to aid the fulfilment of Society objectives (e.g. the biennial general meeting (BGM), awards, presidential election etc.). The conference organising committee (OC) is expected to make provision for these items within the programme, but not necessarily responsible for execution of all. A few 'traditions' which have steadily been introduced are also mentioned and could be considered 'sentimental' rather than 'essential' inclusions in the programme.

Biennial Academic Conference

The Academic Conference is traditionally aimed at Society members who are active researchers or PhD students (on occasion Masters students), and affiliated with a research institutions. Honours students are generally not included in the programme. In the past, non-member/non-researchers, e.g. government officials and practitioners, have also been invited to participate. Table 5 outlines the essential items for the Academic Conference programme, indicating the partner responsible for arrangements.

The following traditions have also been included previously:

- During the Gala event:
 - past president acts as Master of Ceremonies and the outgoing president hands out the awards
 - the audience places a wager on the length of new president address
 - the next hosts are announced
- Other:
 - address by acting/current president at the opening ceremony
 - keynote address
 - public outreach/lecture
 - excursions
 - entertainment/social evenings
 - networking opportunity for members and non-members

Annual Student Conference

The Student Conference traditionally caters for registered Honours & Masters students (PhD candidates are also welcome, but generally encouraged to attend the Academic Conference).

The post-graduate students of the hosting institution are usually involved in the organisation process. Group coordinators can accompany their students; therefore, make provision for them in the budget. The essential events are outlined in table 6.

Other Student Conference traditions are:

- ice-breaker or socialising/network opportunity at the beginning of the conference
- a keynote speaker on the theme, or a motivational speaker from the industry
- an excursion.

Table 5: A list of Society specific requirements for the biennial Academic Conference.

Guidelines	OC	Council
Council Meeting		X
Biennial General Meeting (BGM)		X
Keynote speaker(s)*	X	
Oral and Poster Sessions*	X	
Proceedings	X	X
Programme & Book of Abstracts	X	
Writing Workshop		X
Gala Dinner / Awards Ceremony	X	
New President Address (at Ceremony)		X
Awards – Fellowship, Society, Best MSc dissertations etc.		X

*item dependent on conference format.

Table 6: A list of Society specific requirements for the annual Student Conference.

Guidelines	OC	Council
Opening address on behalf of Society*	X	X
Oral and Poster Sessions	X	
Judging & Prizes for Awards:		
Oral presentations (each graduate level and subdiscipline);	X	
Posters (overall) **		
Book of Abstracts and Programme	X	
Gala Dinner /Award Ceremony	X	X

*or any Council Member that can represent the Society; **10 prizes in total.

CONCLUSION

Within the SSAG there was a need for a guideline to increase the efficiency of planning, and administration of traditional conference organising, which is a frequent task at the hands of its members. Such a guideline is presented here by the organisers of the last SSAG conferences, in light of challenges faced and outcomes reached.

Specific to the SSAG, the guideline serves as a baseline from which the Society can assess the effectiveness of their conferences to meet Society needs or objectives (Visser et al., 2016;

Pretorius and Rudolph, 2019). As the needs and intentions of the Society change, the approach to conferences may have to adapt, and so the planning guideline. Future inclusions may be to fully consider the environmental impact of the conference programme, as well the attendees' footprint, or considering what the attending delegation's perception of conference purpose is. There is a need also to reflect on participation demographics and how institutional or societal culture can affect the attendance of, for example, certain sub-disciplines.

The purpose of this guideline is not to limit the creativity of future organising committees, but rather serve as a starting point. Although the guideline was developed with the SSAG in mind, the to-do list and editable templates presented are based on a linear/traditional approach to planning that is useful (and adaptable) for any society in need of guidance in their conference planning and organisation.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the Society of South African Geographers for the openness to appreciate new endeavours experimented with during *SSAG2018* and the Council for their support. We thank the staff of the Geography Department, UFS for their invaluable part in organising *SSAG2018*. In particular, Mr. Adriaan van der Walt for his work on the proceeding guidelines and CPD registration.

Disclaimer: The views expressed here, if biased, is that of the authors, and not necessarily the Society of South African Geographers, its Council nor any other staff from the Department of Geography (UFS).

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