

Guidelines for BSHS Postgraduate Conferences

Aims and Objectives

Each year, the BSHS holds a postgraduate workshop/conference. The conference has both an academic and a social purpose: to provide postgraduates in the history of science with an opportunity to meet each other, to share ideas and experiences, and to give what might be their first-ever conference paper in a friendly and supportive environment. It is also hoped that the postgraduate meeting will encourage new members of the profession to attend the resumed BSHS annual conference in the summer, and to join the BSHS itself.

The conference is in no way limited to British postgraduates, and recent events have been attended by a sizeable minority of overseas postgraduates. 'History of science' should be broadly defined to include science, technology and medicine. It is intended as an event organised by postgraduates for postgraduates. It therefore also provides an opportunity for postgraduates to gain experience of organising a conference.

Timing and Structure

The conference usually lasts 2 nights / 2 ½ days, beginning with registration and a reception on the first night, followed by two full days of sessions, usually with a conference dinner on the second night (and people going home on the third night). There have occasionally been tours or visits included in the programme, but there are usually so many papers to fit in that there isn't much spare time.

The format is usually sessions of four 15-20 min papers with discussion, separated by coffee/tea/lunch, but alternatives have sometimes been tried. One possibility is short (e.g. 5 minute) presentations from first year postgraduates (who have not done enough research yet for a full paper). Another possibility, for the same reason, is a poster session, but this will involve having a place to display posters, and timetabling a session for people to be on duty by their posters while being visited by everyone else. Otherwise the posters tend to get ignored in favour of coffee or biscuits.

BSHS feels that it is important that the conference takes place out of term, a) so that postgrads with teaching commitments are able to attend; b) so that it will be easier for host institutions to provide rooms/lecture theatres; c) so that it will be easier to find accommodation, e.g. in halls of residence. For these reasons, the conference should be in early January. If there are extenuating circumstances, mid-December would be the best alternative, although it would give less time for new postgrads to have done enough research to give a talk.

Organisers should bear in mind that institutions have different term/semester arrangements.

Members of staff from the host institution may wish to attend, but should be reminded that this is intended as a postgraduate event. It would be a good idea to invite them enthusiastically to the first-night drinks reception, but ask them to stay in the background thereafter. There ought also to be a BSHS representative present (to publicise the Society), but this would be most likely to be the student member currently on Council.

Organisation

The conference is usually organised by a small committee (perhaps three or four, hopefully with extra helpers) of postgraduates from the host institution. It goes without saying that they should have the approval and support of their department/centre. They can also call upon the BSHS programme secretary, treasurer or executive secretary for further help or guidance.

A call for papers usually goes out in late summer (see appendix I for possible timetable), via the BSHS newsletter, the Society's website, and the history of science mailing lists (e.g. Mersenne, H-Sci-Med-Tech, perhaps the various departmental lists...). Conferences organisers used to use the *List of Theses in the History of Science* to send (by post) an announcement to almost every relevant postgraduate in the country – future organisers may well feel that electronic methods of communication supersede this. Although the deadline for expressions of interest shouldn't be before the start of autumn term – so as not to miss postgrads who are just starting out – it would be a good idea for the date to have been announced earlier in the year (e.g. June newsletter, website).

Another reason for confirming the dates early in the process is because accommodation needs to be sorted out as early as possible, to make sure enough rooms will be available.

The conference organisers have the unenviable task of trying to arrange all the people who want to give a paper into sessions. It is wisest to delay all decisions about rejection and acceptance until after the deadline for submissions, because only then will the organisers know how many (if any) papers it is necessary for them to reject. They should remember that the aim is to be inclusive as possible (thus, a paper should not be rejected merely because it cannot be fitted into a themed session). However, the conference is dedicated to HSTM/STS so papers which are not somehow connected to the discipline may fairly be rejected.

Given that there are only two days, and that there are not usually parallel sessions, it is possible to squeeze four sessions of four speakers into each day, giving 32 speakers overall (allowing 20 minutes per speaker, including question time). Variations are of course possible on this basic plan.

If it happens that there are more paper submissions (on relevant topics) than it is possible to fit into the programme, then some will have to be declined. Preference for inclusion should be given to those in the earlier stages of their postgraduate career: hence, someone in their third year, who presented at the last two postgrad conferences and also at the last summer conference, could legitimately be rejected to make space for a first-year giving their first ever paper. The organisers could gain information about who has presented before from the programmes of past conferences; or the registration form could be designed to include a question about participation at past conferences.

When papers have to be declined, it is important to be tactful. Thank the applicant for their proposal, indicate that it is being declined with regret, and give some indication of the reason for the rejection (e.g. not relevant to the conference; or, too many applicants, so preference has been given to neophytes, of which the applicant is not

one...). End by encouraging the applicant to come to the conference anyway, although, realistically, people whose papers have been declined may well drop out entirely, thus reducing the expected attendance.

It is acceptable to notify applicants of their acceptance or rejection by email. Some applicants (often those from overseas, or those seeking travel grants from their institution) may request a hard-copy letter of acceptance, and this should be supplied (it could be the text of the email, printed onto a formal letter head). Please take care not to give any assurances that might be interpreted as implying financial support (Butler-Eyles grant applications are dealt with separately, by the Treasurer), and refer any requests for more complicated paperwork to BSHS Council (e.g. the Programme Secretary).

A draft programme should be issued as soon as possible (e.g. early November), at which point it is possible to ask people to formally register and pay, with a deadline of, say, early December.

A final communication with attendees will be necessary in December, to confirm receipt of payment, accommodation details, and the most up-to-date programme. Make sure that it is utterly clear where attendees should go on arriving in a strange town on day one! This will probably be to their accommodation – they also need to know when to be where that evening for registration. A map might be helpful...

When planning the programme, organisers should bear in mind that a) no one really wants to start at 9am, and b) the timetable will be very tight, so it's important to make sure presenters don't run over. Consider using a system of warning notices (e.g. 5 mins to go, 3 mins, 1 min, stop!) and ask session chairs to be strict. No matter how often you tell them, speakers will almost certainly run over. It is a good idea to build some slack into the programme by making sure that coffee breaks are longer than you think you will need.

Financial Matters

In the past, the conference has been a shoe-string operation, trying to keep costs as low as possible to make it accessible to all postgrads. The support of the host institution is frequently crucial to making success on a small budget possible, while BSHS also assists with accommodation subsidies. Some past organising committees have been successful in securing additional grants, which has allowed them to plan something a little more lavish, but future organisers should not feel that they are producing an inadequate conference if they do not secure such grants. The important thing is to put together a well-run event, enjoyed by as many people as possible.

Like any other BSHS conference, the conference must be organised to break-even, accommodation excepted (see appendix III). To demonstrate this, the organising committee need to submit a proposed income/expenditure schedule to BSHS Council (i.e. the Treasurer) well ahead of time – before the registration form goes out. This should detail the proposed registration fee, the expected number of attendees (usually 40-50), and all the expected costs (e.g. administration, refreshments, drinks reception, room hire).

BSHS will subsidise the cost of overnight accommodation for conference participants by 50%. The accommodation is expected to be in halls of residence or equivalent, although cheap commercial accommodation has occasionally been used.

In addition, BSHS underwrites the conference against financial loss. Thus, if, despite all the best intentions, it should happen that there is a loss overall, BSHS will cover it. The corollary of this is that any surplus at the end of the conference will be handed over to BSHS. Any such surplus will be added by BSHS to the Butler-Eyles Fund, which makes travel grants to postgraduate students.

Draft accounts should be prepared as soon as possible after the event, and sent to the Treasurer (in time for the late January Council meeting); finalised accounts should be sent as soon as possible afterwards, and in any event by the April Council meeting. If grants have been received from outside bodies, the accounts should make clear that the grants have been expended on the items for which they were intended.

The precise manner of dealing with the cash flow (cheques received, cash to pay for coffee and biscuits...) can be decided by the organising committee to suit their circumstances, as long as the arrangement is approved by Council (i.e. the Treasurer). It can be done through BSHS – e.g. with all registration cheques going to the Exec Secretary – though this can slow down the process of getting money to spend directly. It can also be done through the host institution, if that institution's administrator/secretary is willing. Some committees have even opened their own bank account.

BSHS would prefer to pay its share of accommodation costs once an invoice has been received (i.e. once we know for certain how many person-nights of accommodation have been used). University residences are usually quite happy with this arrangement, but if commercial accommodation is being used, and requires an advance payment, this can be negotiated with the Treasurer and Executive Secretary.

The registration fee should be kept as low as possible – the main things it has to cover are photocopying, postage, name badges, coffee/tea and biscuits in the intervals, room hire, any included tours/events/receptions. Lunch may or may not be included – depending on your budget, and the availability of local eateries – but make this clear on the registration form. (If it is not included, a list of possible lunch places in the conference pack would be a good idea.) Dinner is not usually included, and the conference dinner would be a separate item on the registration form. Dinner on the first night is usually organised informally. Overnight accommodation is a separate item, and participants should be charged 50% of the actual cost.

Although the list of things to be included in the registration fee may look extensive, host institutions often help with some or more of these items, e.g. by providing the seminar room for free, by allowing the use of the photocopier, and perhaps offering to pay the cost of a drinks reception. Assistance of this sort means that £5 or £10 would be a typical registration fee if lunch and dinner are not included.

Appendix I: Possible timetable

June	Announce date of conference in BSHS newsletter (deadline is probably May) and on website (with contact details of committee)
August?	Issue call for papers
Late September	Re-issue call for papers (to remind people, and to catch new starts)
Mid-October	Deadline for abstracts Update BSHS Programme Secretary on progress; run proposed budget past BSHS Treasurer
Early November	Issue a draft programme to all those who submitted abstracts, and invite registration and payment Issue general call for registration (for those who did not submit abstracts)
Early December	Deadline for registration and payment Update BSHS Treasurer
Early January	The Postgraduate Conference!
Late January (Council meeting)	Draft accounts presented
Early April (Council meeting)	Accounts must be finalised by now

Appendix II: locations of past meetings

2005	Cambridge (held in January)
2004	Manchester (held in January)
2003	London (held in Nov 2002)
2002	Oxford (held in Dec 2001)
2001	Leeds (held in January)
2000	Cambridge (held in January)
1999	Manchester (held in January)
1998	London (held in January)

Appendix III: on financial matters

Extracted from ‘Guidelines to Organisers of Conferences for the British Society for the History of Science’ (Note that this applies to conferences with student and non-student members, paying different registration fees, and where only speakers would get subsidised accommodation; all students at the postgraduate conference get subsidised.)

4. All conferences are expected to be self-supporting. The basic fee should be arranged so that on a reasonable prediction of attendance numbers, the conference will break even. The proposed budget should specify:

- estimated number of full-cost participants
- number of speakers requiring subsidised board and lodging
- any travel costs
- costs of publicity, printing and postage
- costs of hire of meeting rooms (and associated costs, eg projectionist, AV equipment)
- any expenses of the Executive Secretary (handling meeting administration is extra to the normal duties of the Executive Secretary - see 8).
- costs of board and lodging

In addition, for conferences which require a BSHS organising committee, for members of the committee, registration fees should be waived and they should be able to request assistance for travelling expenses and accommodation. The decision on assistance would be taken sympathetically by the Treasurer and President, in the light of the organiser’s need and the Society’s financial circumstances.

In many cases enquiries with the local college or university office will result in VAT not being charged for certain facilities. The principle accepted by Customs & Excise is that “internal” arrangements are not subject to VAT. Thus where a local member can make local arrangements in his or her name, that member will be billed without VAT and the BSHS will (legally) pay the bill, resulting in substantial savings. The VAT position should be established early in the arrangements.

A Note on Provisional Balance Sheets for Meetings

It is important to prepare in advance as far as possible financial estimates in relation to any conference or meeting. Normal practice is clearly not to run events at a loss although this may be thought by some to be one of the functions of a charitable organisation. However, it is important not just for good housekeeping reasons but also for legal considerations that all events can be seen to be organised initially so as not to sustain a loss. HM Customs & Excise make this quite clear in their VAT regulations and at least as importantly, the Charity Commissioners have ruled that registered charities must not set out to expect to make a loss. In an imperfect world, a loss may well result for a variety of reasons; this is accepted, provided forward planning can be shown to give an intention at least to break even and preferably to expect a surplus.

