

HHBIC 2020 Paper Presentation Session Chair Guidelines/Tips

Dear HHBIC2020 Session Chair

What follows are guidelines/tips for Session Chairs (SC). We hope that these will help you guide and enjoy your chairing experience.

Guidelines on how to chair the conference session

1. Come prepared

At least a day/few days in advance, familiarise yourself with the names and abstracts of the people speaking at your session (see the draft conference programme). A few things to consider:

- **Make sure you know how to introduce each speaker.** If you need to formally introduce the speakers with a short biography, make sure you received the relevant information or do your own research. You can also ask speakers to introduce themselves. However, this is not always necessary (especially if time is limited). For parallel sessions at the HHBIC2020, it is sufficient to state the speaker's name and institution.
- **Make sure you know how to introduce each presentation.** Read each abstract and prepare a sentence in your head paraphrasing the content of the presentation. If you do not fully understand it, pick out what seem to be the most important terms or concepts to mention those in your introduction. Giving this kind of introduction is more engaging than simply reading out the title of the presentation.
- **Think about what the talks in your session have in common.** For example, do they address a similar theme from different perspectives? If so, you can try and highlight this during the introductions, too (e.g. "and now our second speaker will also explore topic X but from perspective Y") – this helps to guide the audience through the session. However, if there is no obvious connection, you can just say, "we have a great variety of talks ahead of us" and mention one or two of the topics.

In addition, it is useful to **have a structure for the session in mind**. Usually, there will be four parts:

- Firstly, an opening segment where you welcome the audience and speakers, introduce yourself and the topic of the session and make any formal announcements;
- Secondly, the individual talks whereby you briefly introduce each speaker/talk and hand over to the speaker;
- Thirdly, you invite audience questions, either after each talk or collectively after all talks (this can be agreed with the speakers prior to the session start); and
- Finally, a closing segment where you may make some closing remarks and thank the speakers and the audience for attending (you can use a closing phrase such "how about a round of applause for our speakers").

2. Manage the time well

Perhaps the most important tasks of the chair are to **finish the session on time** and to ensure that **each speaker has an equal amount of time** available. In addition, you need to do it in a way that does not make the audience or speakers feel stressed. How to achieve this? Be subtle and make sure that everybody understands the structure for the session.

- **Bring a clock and remember to note when each talk starts** so that you know when it should finish.
- **Bring a sign.** On an A4 sheet, write (or print) "5 min" (on one side) and "1 min" (on the other side) in big letters. This will come in handy when you need to inform speakers how much time is left, as you can simply show them the sign instead of having to wave your hand or otherwise struggle to

get their attention. As HHBIC2020 is a virtual conference, you can agree upon the suitable way to inform speakers about the time. For example, a signal or a message might be good ways.

- **Inform the speakers and the audience.** Before the session starts, inform each speaker how much time they will have for their talk and that you will use a sign to signal when there are 5 minutes and 1 minute left. At the beginning of the session, inform the audience about the format in terms of timing and when questions will be taken.
- **Be strict with the speaker.** If a speaker does not end on time, do not wait politely until they have finished. If they are ignoring or not seeing your "5 min/1 min" sign (see above), it is acceptable for you to interrupt and remind them of the time remaining. Consider also, how far the presentation has progressed: If time is running out and the presenter is still describing their methods, you will want to warn them earlier about the time than if they are already talking about their conclusions. If the time is already up, ask them to wrap up their talk in one sentence and apologise by saying that "we need to move on to allow time for questions and the other speakers". If they still do not stop after a few more minutes, you can cut them off by saying something like "I'm really sorry but unfortunately we must end this talk here, thank you very much" and start clapping. This may seem rude but remember that it is equally rude to use up the time reserved for the other speakers.
- **Be strict with the audience.** If the audience has a lot of questions, or one audience member engages the speaker in a heated debate, it is fine (and may even be necessary!) to not take all questions or to even stop an ongoing discussion. Politely but assertively, ask the audience to continue the conversation during the coffee break. If the speaker ran over time, you should still allow one question, but probably not more (unless the first one was answered very quickly).
- **Be strict with yourself.** Do not be tempted to let a speaker talk longer or to ask them many questions yourself, just because you are personally interested in this speaker and their research. The same applies if you have been allocated to chair a session where you are also a speaker: do not give preferential treatment to your own talk.
- **Stay flexible.** For example, if the session started late, quickly reconsider the timings and inform the speaker and the audience of the adapted timings. If a speaker failed to show up, allow more time for the remaining speakers (splitting it up equally). It is also useful to know what follows after your session. If the following slot is a half hour coffee break or a long lunch, you may be able to go overtime a few minutes. However, if the next slot is only a 10-minute break, be sure to finish exactly on time.

3. Make the speakers feel at ease

The speakers are probably nervous about their upcoming talk. Try to create a calm environment for them, as this will increase the quality of the session.

- **If possible, try to be in the room/session ten minutes earlier.** Check if the speakers are there already, introduce yourself, give them warm smiles, check that their slides are working, etc. If there are any problems, see if there is a technician who could help or ask one of the conference organisers for help. At this point, you can also ask the speakers how to pronounce their names correctly (usually people with difficult-to-pronounce names will be grateful that you are asking). Confirm what is their role and institutional affiliation if you would like to mention this in your introduction (as they may have changed jobs since submitting the abstract).
- **Agree on a format for the session.** Besides talking through the timings, you can also ask if the speakers would prefer questions after each talk or a round of questions after all talks. The latter may be appropriate, for example, if the talks address very similar issues.

- **Prepare emergency questions.** If there are no questions from the audience, most speakers will appreciate if the chair asks a question. Based on the abstracts, you may be able to prepare 1-2 emergency questions in advance (or you can write down questions whilst listening to the talk). If you cannot think of anything, ask a general question. Before the session starts, you can also ask the speakers directly if there are any questions that they would like to receive after their talk.
- **Remember to thank the speakers** – before the session, during the session (after each talk and again after all talks), and after the session.

4. Put yourself into the shoes of the audience

It is easy to forget about the audience, given that most of them are just sitting there quietly. However, a confused, bored or distracted audience will increase your stress levels. So consider the following:

- **Formally welcome the audience.** Rather than simply starting by saying, “this is a session about topic X”, make sure to engage the audience directly by welcoming them to the session. At the end, thank them for coming.
- **Introduce yourself.** It is amazing how often people forget to do this. Most people in the audience will not know who you are. You do not need to recite your CV but at least state your name and institution.
- **Do not let the audience drift away.** Take a moment now and then to assess the situation from the audience’s point of view.
- **Agree upon how to ask turns for questions or comments.** As the conference is organised virtually, you can ask people to raise hands in the conference platform or send a message to que for a question or a comment. Then allocate turns accordingly.

5. Expect the unexpected

You can be almost certain that something unexpected will happen during the session. Some common problems and other odd things that we have witnessed:

- Speaker doesn’t show up
- Speaker informed that he/she will be late
- Speaker won’t stop talking
- The session is supposed to start but there are only four people in the audience
- The audience can’t think of any questions to ask the speaker
- People in the audience just start shouting out questions
- A heated debate between the speaker and a member of the audience takes over the session
- The first speaker started the session herself because she didn’t realise there was a chair
- The operating system decides to run an update, and many other technical problems ...

What to do in such situations? Simply knowing that it can happen might already help you to stay calm. In addition, by following the tips you can avoid some of these unpleasant situations. Some additional ideas:

- **Take control.** Sometimes it can feel like the speakers or the audience are in charge of the session. Take back control by using phrases such as “I can see there any many questions about this topic”, “please continue this conversation in the coffee break” or “let’s give all speakers a fair chance to present their work”. If at the start of the session there is not yet much audience in the room, wait up to 5 minutes but then start (more people may join later).
- **Decide whether it is better to ignore or to acknowledge distractions.** If there is something that is clearly distracting but you cannot do anything about, it can be a good idea to acknowledge it (e.g.,

"I know you hear that strange noise too, it's really distracting, isn't it, I'm sorry but there's nothing we can do about it right now, so let's try and focus on the speakers regardless"). This can help the audience to direct their attention back to the talks. However, in some cases, it may be better to ignore and not mention it, if you fear that doing otherwise would risk "losing" the audience even more. Make that decision depending on how much it seems to distract the audience.

6. Remember that everyone is just human

Finally, remember that you, the speakers and the audience are all just human!

- **Know yourself and only do what you are comfortable with.** For example, some chairs love to comment on the talks themselves, or to summarise the session at the end. This is a great skill to have, so if you feel comfortable doing so, you can comment on what you found interesting, what you learnt at this session, etc. However, if you feel insecure about this, do not force it.
- **It is OK to have and express emotions.** For example, if a talk is clearly touching or unsettling, you can comment on that aspect. It is also okay to admit it if you are overwhelmed and lost for words. Do not feel you have to act like a robot in order to appear "professional".
- If strange things happen that are outside of your control, remember that the speaker and the audience are probably more understanding and forgiving than you realise. Do not fear that they would blame you, and **do not blame yourself**.

7. Enjoy the conference

- It is a great pleasure that you accepted the chair role at HHBIC2020. We hope you will enjoy the conference presentations, have insightful discussions and get to know new academics. Thank you for playing such an important role at HHBIC2020.