

Evaluation of the 2007 conference in Prague

During the fall of 2007 we asked the participants and organisers of the conference to evaluate different aspects of the conference in order to improve the ESRA conference in 2009. We sent a slightly different questionnaire to participants and organisers of sessions and received answers from 54 of the 60 session organisers and 99 participants in the sessions. This means that we got a reaction of 153 participants out of the 300 participants. We are very grateful for the reaction and report the results below.

Insofar as the questions are comparable we report their answers simultaneously.

General evaluations of the conference

The first topic was the general evaluation of the conference. Table 1 gives the results:

Table 1

Generally speaking, how would you evaluate the quality of the conference? Please give your answer on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means lowest quality and 10 means highest quality.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Organisers	0	0	0	1	1	9	13	20	7	2
Participants	0	0	2	1	5	12	28	32	15	4
Total	0	0	0	2	2	6	21	41	52	22

The table shows that the participants were in general positive about the conference.

We also asked the organisers of sessions for their judgment of the quality of the papers. Their judgments were also given on a scale from 0 to 10.

Table 2

How satisfied were you with the quality of the papers in your session?

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Organisers	0	0	0	2	3	4	16	13	11	5

Except for a few exceptions most organisers were rather satisfied with the quality of the papers. One could say that this is obvious because they selected the paper presenters themselves. However, this is only partially true because the organising committee also received many papers which were distributed over the different sessions. Some of the participants specifically mentioned that the process of selection should be improved and that strict criteria should be developed.

We also asked about the quality of the papers in a different way:

Table 3

Do you think that one or more presentations were so good that they should be published in the journal of ESRA or elsewhere?

	Yes	No	No answer
Organisers	34	17	3
Participants	54	42	3

In addition we asked people to mention the title of a presentation that could or should be published.

The organisers mentioned 41 different titles.

The participants mentioned 35 different titles.

We have given these two lists of titles to the editors of SRM to decide what to do with this information.

Furthermore, we asked "Do you think that some important topics in the field were missing at the conference?"

The suggestions made by participants and organisers concerned:

- o Survey sampling theory;
- o Nonreponse and weights;
- o ALT models and software;
- o General estimation;
- o Outliers;
- o Secondary analysis ;
- o Causal modelling and model selection;
- o Mathematical modelling;
- o Cohort analysis;
- o Fieldwork monitoring;
- o Index construction;
- o Register survey census operations;
- o Comparability of survey questions;
- o Cross –national nonresponse;
- o Fieldwork differences;
- o Event reporting.

Another issue was the big difference in the size of the sessions. Some organisers invited many people for their session. At other conferences organisers others were only allowed to invite four people. Therefore, we were wondering if a restriction should be introduced for the next conference. The results are in Table 4.

Table 4

Some organisers invited many people and organised more than 3sessions. At other conferences session organisers are not allowed to invite more than 4 speakers. Would you be for or against such a rule for the next ESRA conference?

	For	Against	No opinion
Organisers	22	13	19

It seems that there is no strong opinion in one or the other direction. Maybe we should allow more than 4 speakers to be invited but not 10 or more.

We also asked about another possible rule:

Table 5

The following possible rule has also been suggested: In each session at least one of the speakers invited by the organiser should be opposed to the theory defended by that organiser. Would you be for or against making such a rule?

	For	Against	No opinion	No answer
Organisers	12	27	14	1

Given this results we can conclude that there no support for this rule.

Future improvements

Cancellations at the last moment are always a serious problem. Our policy has been to prepare the final program for the conference at the last moment (day before the conference) so that the final cancellations are taken into account and the program is as up to date as possible. Nevertheless, participants mentioned that this procedure, and in particular, the so caused late publication of the final schedule, should be improved. The problem is that cancellations also occurred at the very last moment or people just did not appear. We asked the organisers of sessions how often that happened in their sessions.

The organisers reported this problem as follows for their sessions:

Table 6

Cancellations	Sessions
0	42
1	11
2	3
3	1
4	0
5	1
Total	58

In total 25 of the approximately 300 presentations did not take place even though they were announced in the program (8.3%). This looks like a limited problem but it is inconvenient. It is very hard to think of any solution for this problem. If anybody has a suggestion, we would welcome it.

What at least could have been done was announce the cancellations clearly in some way or another. We suggested that the organisers would keep the time table as it was if a paper dropped out. In that time the discussion could be extended or a break could be made. This policy however was not always followed and as a consequence participants came to a presentation which was already done or was not done at al. The former is

even more annoying than the latter. So we asked the participants to evaluate on a scale from 0 to 10 how badly or well the changes in the presentations were announced. The result was as follows.

Table 7

Evaluation of announcement of program changes and cancellations

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Participants	2	1	7	7	10	27	12	11	9	7	3

This table clearly shows that this point requires improvement because close to 70% of the participants evaluated this aspect of the organisation negatively.

In order to prepare the conference the organising committee asked session organisers to ask participants for their sessions and the committee suggested some presentations to the organisers of the sessions. The organisers made the decision whether a presentation was allowed in their session or not. However it was not clear to some organisers that the committee followed their judgment.

In the end we had also to merge some sessions because there were too many sessions and we had to reduce the program. Therefore some organisers complained about the procedure and that the communication with the organising committee was not optimal. But overall the evaluation was not that negative as can be seen in the next table where the organisers indicate their satisfaction with the communication with the organising committee on a 0 to 10 scale.

Table 8

Satisfaction with the communication with the organising committee

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Organisers	3	0	2	1	3	1	7	13	5	7	11

Table 8 clearly shows that some organisers were really annoyed about the process and it is clear that this point should be improved next time. There should be more time for the preparation of the sessions and the programs.

Concerning the framework, 90% of the participants were satisfied or very satisfied about the arrangements with respect to the coffee breaks but less, 70%, with respect to the dinners. The reason was probably that it was too crowded in the dining room.

It was suggested by the organisers and participants that the conference dinner should not be held after the conference but at any day during it.

80% agreed with the arrangement that the organising committee does not arrange the hotel accommodation.

Finally, 65% did not mind that there were not enough printed versions of the book with abstracts. They preferred a CD Rom version anyway.

We thank you for your comments and hope you agree with the conclusion we have drawn from it for the next conference.