

# The Future of the Inclusive Conference: Guidance for Conference and Event Organisers

British Association for American Studies

## Introduction

The BAAS Executive Committee are committed to making our conferences in the field of American Studies more inclusive. We are aware that BAAS could do more to broaden our gender and racial diversity and ensure that all colleagues feel welcomed and are involved in our events, to provide support for postgraduate students and early career academics, and to make our events more accessible to scholars with disabilities or those with caring responsibilities, and so on. We are conscious of the significant challenge of meeting these goals whilst considering the financial and environmental sustainability of multi-day conferences that seek to include scholars from around the world. We are also aware that online conferences pose their own set of challenges around issues of inclusivity.

This guide seeks to provide conference organisers, both of BAAS conferences and other events funded by BAAS, with information, guidance, and suggestions for how to make events as inclusive as possible. It does not seek to be definitive, and very much remains a work-in-progress. We hope that the strategies outlined below will help us to improve our events and to ensure that we are always working towards conferences that are welcoming, accessible and inclusive, and that they therefore continue to serve our purposes as a scholarly organisation seeking to develop and support American Studies in the UK.

This guide has been developed through the work of multiple BAAS members. Thanks go to Kate Dossett, Nick Grant and Rachel Williams, who spearheaded the initial idea of the 'Future of the Inclusive Conference' event. Ellie Armon Azoulay, Christine Okoth, Lydia Plath, Cara Rodway, and Tom Wright chaired a workshop on the Future of the Inclusive Conference at the BAAS 2021 digital conference, which provided the key questions and structure for this guidance. We are thankful to all the BAAS members who attended that session and provided their feedback and ideas about how to make our conferences more inclusive.

BAAS is far from the first organisation to seek to answer these questions, and we are thankful to the scholars whose work we build upon here. In particular, we are drawing on good practice from the [Royal Historical Society](#), [Historians of the Twentieth Century United States \(HOTCUS\)](#) and [REACH](#). A list of references and further reading is provided at the end of this guide.

Conference organisers and all BAAS members are encouraged to provide feedback on this guidance, so that it remains a living document that grows and changes with our membership and as we learn from good practice. Please email Dr Lydia Plath ([l.j.plath@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:l.j.plath@warwick.ac.uk)) with any feedback.

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## 1. Where, When, and How Much? Planning to Host a Conference

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, most conferences and events were held in person, but the experience of moving to online working, as well as technological developments, have enabled many of us to become more confident and comfortable organising and engaging with online events. In the future, we will have a choice between in-person events, online events, and various hybrid models. The first planning decision will therefore be to decide whether a conference should be in person, online, or a combination of the two. Issues of inclusivity and sustainability should play a role in this decision. There are no easy answers to whether conferences are better online or in person, as both have benefits and create challenges for inclusivity. In-person events can be excellent for networking, socialising, catching up with old friends and making new contacts, but they can also be expensive, time-consuming, inaccessible, and environmentally unsustainable. Online events are less expensive, more accessible, and flexible, but they can be exhausting, unengaging, and exacerbate the hierarchies of power that have historically made conferences exclusive and unwelcoming.

### **What is the purpose of the conference or event?**

Is it predominately to share or disseminate research, for networking, or something else? Or a combination? Think about whether the purpose is best served by an in-person or an online event. Disseminating research to as many people as possible might be best done online, but networking and professional socialising might work better in person. Hybrid models might allow the best of both worlds but may be more complicated to organise.

### **Who do you want to attend and participate?**

Is it a conference targeted at postgraduates or early career academics, who might have restricted budgets? Do you expect a large number of international attendees? What about those employed outside of academia, or who have caring responsibilities? Or do you wish to focus particularly on including scholars of colour, women, and/or those with disabilities? Understanding your target audience might help you to determine whether an event should be in-person or online. Think about whether it is financially possible or environmentally sustainable to have many of your attendees meet high costs or travel long distances for your conference, when they could participate online instead, or access a recording.

## A. Location

Think about whether your inclusivity goals are about quantity: enabling as many people as possible able to attend your event from around the world, which is likely best done online; or quality: enabling deep networking and social discussions between a smaller number of attendees, which may be easier in person. Hybrid models offer a mixture.

### **Online:**

- Think about which **platform** will best suit your event. Find out if you are restricted to the platform your institution uses, or if you can be more flexible. Bear in mind that some platforms (e.g. MS Teams) restrict some functionality to members of the organisation. Costs vary considerably depending on the functionality required, and free versions of software often do not have the necessary functionality for professional events. Make sure you have space in your budget to cover these costs. Consider how many attendees the software can allow, and whether you will need parallel sessions.
- Consider using **features** like breakout rooms, the chat function, or recordings to make your event more interactive or accessible. Most platforms offer a distinction between a “webinar” and a “meeting”. A webinar is the safer choice for large audiences and events that will be recorded as it cannot be disrupted by attendees, but it leaves little space for interaction or discussion. Alternatively, you might wish to explore other networking platforms (e.g. wonder.me or gather.town), or to create “lobby” spaces, to enable more informal networking spaces for attendees. You could leave an online meeting open for a short period after the session ends, to allow people to “stay in the room” and chat informally with the speakers.
- Be clear about what **technical specifications** are required for both organisers and attendees. It is important that you feel confident running the technical side of an event and that there are enough members of the organising team to run every event smoothly and deal with any technical problems. It is useful to have someone in each panel running the technical side of things, so that the Chair and panellists can focus on the content of the event. Your attendees will need a stable internet connection, the required bandwidth, and an appropriate device. If you may have attendees from locations with unstable internet or who may suffer from digital poverty, think especially about whether you need to stream video. Do not require your attendees to have their cameras on unless they wish to.
- If you are providing recordings of talks, ensure that you gain **permission** from all attendees for recording, and check any **copyright** implications with your speakers.

### **In person**

- Think about how your attendees will **travel** to your location. Does your proposed venue have good international or long-distance connections? How will attendees get to the specific conference space: are there good local public transport links? If your location expects a lot of international or long-distance attendees but does not have an airport or major train station nearby, this will increase the expense for these attendees, so you may wish to consider subsidising travel to make it more affordable. It might be possible to arrange shared local transportation or to provide bursaries for postgraduates and early career academics.
- One of the main benefits of an in-person conference (outside of the event itself) is the opportunity for your attendees to visit your town or institution, and not just the inside of a hotel or conference centre. Identify the added **cultural or research benefits** to your location and think about how you can integrate these into your programme. You could have a networking event at a local museum, create space in the programme for attendees to visit local landmarks or archives, or include a cultural event relevant to the local area as part of the conference.

- Consider where **networking events** will take place. Will you use an all-inclusive conference venue, or will the conference be spread over multiple sites? Think about how far the accommodation is from the conference and networking spaces. Consider how a wheelchair user or an attendee with limited mobility would be able to navigate the event. Make sure that there is parking, as well as lifts, ramps etc., available at all locations. If you are having any evening events, make sure that there is a walking route back to the accommodation that feels safe and comfortable. You may wish to provide lists of recommended taxi companies or create closed social media channels so that people are not alone when travelling back to their accommodation at night.
- In the **rooms**, ensure that there is an appropriate sound system with microphones, hearing loops etc., as well as enough space for wheelchair users to move around. Make sure signage (to lifts, toilets, rooms etc.) is clear, visible and appropriate. Ensure chairs are available in all rooms where attendees are expected to stand for long periods.
- Ensure that there are **toilets** and facilities available for attendees with physical disabilities. Try to have at least one gender neutral bathroom – this could involve temporarily re-labelling some toilets as gender neutral.
- Provide smaller **additional rooms** that can be used for quiet space, prayers, breastfeeding, etc., and make sure these are made known to your attendees.
- Check with your venue about whether you can provide **childcare** (e.g. a creche) on site as part of your event. You should also consider providing financial support to cover childcare costs for attendees during the event.

### **Hybrid**

Hybrid models may well be the future of academic conferences, as they potentially offer the best of both the online and the in-person worlds, but they also require a great deal of organisation and have not yet been well tried and tested for academic events. For an event that combines the online and the in person, consider all of the points above as well as:

- Consider **recording** and/or **live-streaming** in-person sessions to make them available to those who are not able to attend. You might wish to use social media to take questions from those not in the room. For speakers who are not able to travel, enable them to present digitally.
- Consider enabling attendees to **meet locally** for networking opportunities while presentations are delivered online, or to use a “watch party” or “hub & spoke” model. This requires having local “hosts” as part of the organising team.

### **B. Timing**

Regular academic events are often held at the same time of the year or the week as a matter of tradition, but this means that they can often exclude the same people all the time. Think about when the event should take place, how long it will last, and the start/end timings of each day. This is necessary for both in-person and online events.

- Ensure that the **dates** of your event do not overlap with key religious or national holidays, especially for your target audience. Also avoid school holidays or half-terms, when travel costs are higher and those with caring responsibilities may not be able to attend, and if it is a regular event, think about changing the dates each year so that the same people aren't always excluded. Announce the date early, so that attendees can plan accordingly (e.g. to arrange childcare).
- Consider how **long** your event will last and the balance of **week-day vs weekend** events. One benefit of an online event is that it can be spread over multiple days but be careful of Zoom fatigue and the

ability of participants to engage over a long period of time amongst the distractions of home life. If your event is targeted at those employed outside of academia, think about the timing of the event. Holding it on a weekend might enable more people to attend but might also cause challenges for those with caring responsibilities. Online or hybrid events should also consider the time zone(s) of the target audience.

- If you are hosting an in-person event, think about how and when attendees will **travel** to your event. If you start at 9am and end at 5 or 6pm, how many attendees will have to stay overnight or cover the additional expense of travelling at peak times? Starting later and finishing earlier (e.g. lunchtime-to-lunchtime) might enable those relying on support or childcare to attend the whole event.
- Ensure that **networking** events aren't only in the evenings, excluding attendees with caring responsibilities or with certain disabilities who may find events tiring. Schedule a daytime or lunchtime networking session as well.
- Provide a **break** between each session, for both in-person and online events. Try to make short breaks as long as possible (minimum 15 minutes), but also provide structured networking during longer breaks so that attendees are not left isolated and disengaged.

### C. Cost

Keeping costs down is one of the biggest challenges for conference organisers. It may be that conferences are a funding stream for an organisation, or that there are costs that are not visible to the attendee (especially the case for online events), so they often are very expensive to run. However, there are ways to make events more financially inclusive.

- Keep **costs** down by thinking carefully about what is really necessary to make your event a success. At an in-person event, is there a way to reduce venue costs by changing the timings, the accommodation, or the rooms? Could you have a hybrid model to reduce travel costs? Do you need to pay a high fee to an influential plenary speaker, or could you have a different kind of plenary event? Do you need any conference giveaways like tote-bags, mugs, or notebooks? (If you do provide these kinds of items, make sure they are useful and reusable for environmental sustainability). For online events, make sure you are not paying extra for functionality or technology that you do not need.
- Provide **bursaries, discounts** or other financial support for postgraduates, early career academics, those unwaged or precariously employed, or those from underrepresented groups. Bursaries could cover (or part-cover) the conference fee, accommodation and/or travel. Bursaries can be funded either through raising the cost for all other attendees, or through **external funding**.
- Be as **transparent** as possible about the costs of the conference, and what is and is not included. Sometimes the perception is that online events should be free, but due to the costs of software platforms and the need for technical assistance this is often not the case. At in-person events, be clear about whether food, accommodation, and cultural activities are included in the cost, and whether participants can **opt out** of certain aspects (e.g. the conference dinner or hotel). For multi-day conferences, consider providing day-rate options. However, make sure that those who opt out of expensive entertainment or dinners have alternative networking opportunities.
- Consider providing **financial support** for childcare (e.g. through a free creche or a childcare bursary) and for those who need to be accompanied by a helper or carer in order to attend.

## 2. Who? Putting together your Programme

The question of who is invited to speak has had the most media attention in relation to inclusivity, especially around issues of gender diversity. As the Royal Historical Society argues, "it is not only discriminatory but also intellectually indefensible to have events completely dominated by men" (RHS Gender Report 2018, p. 77). In

2017, BAAS instituted a policy to reject all-male panel proposals under the provision of s. 158 Equality Act 2010. However, issues of inclusivity stretch far beyond the banning of all-male panels. When designing your programme, think about the diversity and inclusivity of the programme as a whole, as well as in the individual sessions or panels.

### **What is the purpose of the conference or event?**

Think about what conference formats best serve your purpose. Traditional three-paper-panels or single-expert plenaries might be the best way to disseminate cutting-edge research, but workshops, reading groups and networking events might work better to facilitate collaboration and career development.

### **Who do you want to attend and participate?**

Understand how your target audience will read your Call for Papers or view your programme. Think about what you can do to make sure that your programme and speakers reflect your attendees as a whole and make everyone feel welcome.

#### A. Call for Papers

- Inclusivity should be at the forefront of the **intellectual framing and design** of your event. Try to make sure that you have diverse input into your organising team, including women, scholars of colour, LGBT+ scholars, scholars with disabilities, and scholars from across the career spectrum (i.e. from postgraduate to Professor). If you seek to have a conference or a session that targets those working outside of academia, ensure that you get input from such colleagues at the design stage.
- If you prefer (or require) the submission of proposals for pre-arranged panels rather than individual papers, **provide opportunities for those seeking to form panels to find co-panellists** (e.g. via your website or social media), rather than assuming your attendees will use pre-formed networks that might exclude postgraduates or early career academics.
- If your field is **multi-lingual**, think about how to include speakers of other languages at your event. You could provide the Call for Papers in multiple languages, and make it clear how **translation** will be provided.
- The traditional keynote lectures and panel discussions are excellent ways to share and disseminate research but are not the only session formats available. Encourage a **wider range of formats** (workshops, roundtables, reading groups) that might be more interactive and inclusive of diverse voices, especially if your main purpose is to facilitate networking. Panels do not need to end after their allotted hour; consider having themed panels that continue the conversation throughout the conference or on social media.
- Make your commitment to inclusivity **transparent** through the tone and content of your Call for Papers (and all conference materials), which should be welcoming and inviting to all. You might want to ask colleagues from a diverse range of backgrounds to read it before publication. Include as much **information** about bursaries, childcare etc. as possible (see Section A).
- **Share** your Call for Papers as widely as possible, and not just to the usual mailing lists and social media. You may want to contact specific organisations or groups working in your field to offer them a space on your programme in order to increase diversity.

#### B. Keynotes, Plenaries, and Invited Speakers

- The identity of a keynote speaker sends a strong signal about both the event and the field more generally. Make sure you consider scholars from all backgrounds in deciding who to invite, and consider inviting someone from an **underrepresented** group in your field to present their research.

- Keynotes are traditionally one expert speaker, but they don't need to be. Consider instead having a plenary **roundtable** about a specific intellectual question, which includes a diverse range of speakers from across the career spectrum.
- When inviting speakers, don't assume a relationship between **identity and expertise**. Scholars of colour work on many topics beyond race and ethnicity, LGBT+ scholars don't all research LGBT+ studies, etc. Similarly, in an intellectual or research context, don't ask people to speak on the basis of their identity rather than their expertise. Make sure to avoid **tokenism**: don't only invite women to talk about gender, or scholars of colour to talk about their experiences of racism.

### C. Panels

- Make it clear in your Call for Papers that panels should reflect the **diversity** of your field in terms of gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, institutional affiliation, and career spectrum, and make sure your programme overall reflects this diversity as well.
- Diversity should be achieved through the **speakers**, rather than by assigning chairing duties to overcome an all-male or all-white panel (especially if this is done at a late stage).
- Make sure that your panel formats and content are **relevant** to your audience. For example, a conference that has a large audience of postgraduates and early career academics could highlight panels that focus on publishing or career development.
- Decide whether presentations will be given live or **pre-circulated**. The former can be either formal or relaxed, and may allow presenters the space to test out new ideas; the latter allows more flexibility around timing, so audiences can digest the material in more depth (which might benefit discussion), as well as accessibility for those for whom the paper is not in their native language.
- Consider publishing the **abstracts** (and/or keywords) for both individual papers and whole panels in the conference programme. This will both help attendees decide which papers are of interest to them, but will also help them to formulate questions about the broader themes of the panel.

### D. Registration

- Think about all the additional **information** you might need from your attendees in advance of the event. As well as collecting contact information and payment at the point of registration, also specify that you welcome all and what support you will be able to provide. You may wish to collect the following information:
  - Preferred name (including title)
  - Pronouns
  - Accessibility needs
  - Childcare or breastfeeding needs
  - Financial support
  - Dietary requirements
- Decide what information is required on your **badges**. Think about whether you need to list institutions or titles, which could be exclusionary for independent scholars or postgraduates, and can create a sense of hierarchy. Consider putting research interests on badges instead. Providing pronouns on badges avoids putting the onus on trans and non-binary attendees and helps normalise respectful use of pronouns. Or you could simply provide blank badges and suggest people self-select the information they wish to include.
- For in person events, provide attendees with **detailed information** about the venue(s), including maps of the layout and details of how to get to the location. For online events, provide attendees with detailed information about how to access the conference, including information about how to use the



software. Provide any information about how to access automatic transcripts, captioning, and other accessibility functions.

### 3. Having Inclusive Discussions and Encouraging Participation

Whether a conference is in person or online, it is important to ensure that all attendees feel confident and able to participate in discussions, Q&A sessions, and networking events no matter their identity or where they fall on the career spectrum. Clear guidelines should be given to event organisers and panel chairs, but also to all attendees, as it is the responsibility of all of us to make sure that events are inclusive.

#### What is the purpose of the conference or event?

Think about what kinds of discussions you want to generate. If your purpose is to disseminate research, and thus you have chosen a formal panel presentation format, think about how you can invite the audience to share their perspectives on the research, to ask questions, or to challenge ideas, without aggression or intimidation. If your purpose is to encourage collaboration and networking, you might want to use reading groups or pre-circulated papers, or breakout rooms, to enable deeper discussion of the research, as well as social events. Most events will have some informal networking opportunities alongside the formal programme.

#### Who do you want to attend and participate?

Think about what you can do to make sure that the atmosphere in every room, whether it is a plenary session, a panel presentation, or a networking event is welcoming to all participants, and not hostile or dominated by certain voices. Professional networking is an integral part of the conference experience, so should not be approached as a bonus or an afterthought. Think about where and when informal networking events will take place, and whether they have additional costs attached, to ensure certain people are not excluded. Consider whether networking should be lateral (peer-to-peer) or hierarchical, and what would most benefit your attendees.

#### A. Panel Sessions

- Organisers should make sure that Chairs are provided with contact information for speakers, and Chairs should be asked to **contact speakers in advance** to find out how they prefer to be addressed, how to pronounce names, check pronouns, and confirm biographies. The Chair could also take this opportunity to encourage the speakers to suggest questions for themselves or for each other.
- Organisers should provide detailed **guidance for Chairs** in advance explaining expectations and suggesting ways to make sessions more inclusive. Consider offering those new to Chairing brief training or an opportunity to ask questions about how to manage the session, as well as any written guidance.
- Organisers should provide detailed **guidance for speakers** in advance explaining expectations, especially about the length of papers. Presenters should always ensure that they stay within their allocated time.
- Organisers should consider providing detailed **guidance for audiences** in advance explaining expectations, especially about how to ask constructive questions that lead to discussion rather than confrontation.
- An example of guidance for panel sessions is included as an appendix to this guide.

#### B. Networking and Social Events

- Networking at academic conferences can be structured or entirely informal. Consider having **multiple** types of networking spaces, as entirely informal networking (e.g. an unstructured reception) can be intimidating for many attendees).



- Networking events often take place in the evening at in-person conferences but consider having some **daytime** networking as part of the programme so that those who are not staying overnight, would prefer to avoid alcohol, or have caring responsibilities, can still attend these events.
- Offer attendees the opportunity to **pre-book** short networking meetings to take place during the event, for example around a particular aspect of career development or a research interest. Or you could offer a **randomised** networking session, where attendees are split into groups by the organisers (this works well using breakout rooms online).
- Consider allocating themes or **specific topics** for discussion at networking sessions, to eliminate the need for small talk.
- Make sure that **entertainment** is not hierarchical or too expensive (e.g. the conference “banquet”). Consider cultural activities or events as alternative opportunities for different types of interaction.
- If you are providing **food**, make sure that you collect information about dietary requirements in advance, and that all dishes are clearly labelled. If you are not providing food, provide a list of nearby restaurants or cafes that offer vegetarian/vegan/kosher/gluten-free (and so on) food.
- Make sure that not all social gatherings centre around **alcohol** or take place in bars or pubs. Offer alcohol-free alternatives at drinks receptions.

## 4. Dealing with Discrimination and Harassment

Creating a safe, welcoming and inclusive environment should be a priority for conference organisers, and therefore it is important to make clear what is, and what is not, appropriate behaviour, and how to report incidents if they arise.

- Consider developing a **code of conduct or a harassment policy** that attendees must agree to abide by when they register for the conference. This should specify what behaviours are expected from attendees, how to report incidents (including anonymously), and how and when you will deal with complaints.
- Make sure that you have a **clear process** for dealing with complaints of discrimination or harassment, which should be clearly communicated to your attendees in your conference information. At least one of the organising team should take responsibility for handling complaints. If possible, ensure that this person has had some relevant training.

## References and Further Reading

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<https://royalhistsoc.org/policy/lgbt/>

Women's Classical Committee UK, 'How to Avoid a Manel and Beyond' (2017)  
<https://wcc-uk.blogs.sas.ac.uk/files/2017/10/WCC-UK-Diversity-Guidance-2017.pdf>

## Appendix: Detailed Guidance for Chairs, Speakers, and Audiences

These guidelines are adapted from those used by HOTCUS.

### Guidance for Chairs

- Make sure you are **organised**. Introduce yourself to your speakers in advance, ideally by email, and then again in the break before the session. Confirm their biography and paper title, but also find out how they prefer to be addressed, check how to pronounce their names, and check their pronouns. You may also wish to ask speakers for a question that they would like to answer as part of the discussion.
- Pay close attention to **timings**. Always arrive early and begin promptly and make sure you time each speaker's individual slot, so that each has his or her fair share of the session. However awkward it is, you must keep people to their agreed time. Agree in advance with your speakers about what sign you will use to alert them that they need to begin drawing their talk to a close (especially important online), and don't be afraid to interrupt if they have gone over time. Do not give one speaker more prominence than the others, whoever they might be.
- Let the **speakers** take the spotlight and don't hog the time. If you find links with your own work, or think of references that might help to inform speakers' research, talk to them or email them later. Encourage inexperienced researchers and speakers, and boost their confidence by thanking them for their presentation and showing an interest in their work.
- Manage the **Q&A** carefully.
  - You can take a short **break** (3-5 minutes) between the talk and the questions, to allow people time to think through what they wish to ask.
  - Scan the audience to ensure early career researchers and more **reticent** colleagues have an opportunity to address the panel. Women are often under-represented amongst question-askers at conference, so be attentive to that, especially at the start of the Q&A. You don't need to operate on a first-come-first serve basis, and you can take multiple questions from different people at once in order to be more **inclusive**. Keep track of who has indicated that they wish to

ask a question. If you are online, allow people to ask questions using the chat function, and do not require them to turn their cameras on in order to participate.

- Instruct the audience to ask **one** question at a time, so that they don't dominate with a long comment and several questions; you can always come back to them at the end if there is time. Be firm about allowing follow-up questions. Step in and interrupt if a question or comment is hostile or inappropriate.
- Be prepared for **silences**. In case of silence during the Q&A, prepare your own question for each speaker (or use the question that the speaker has indicated in advance), but don't hog the time. Make sure that all speakers get at least one question, and also try to prepare questions that connect the papers together.

### Guidance for Speakers

- Be absolutely sure that your presentation is **timed** correctly. Aim for a minute or two under the allotted time, you can always say more in the Q&A (but don't use the Q&A to simply continue your paper).
- If you are using **slides**, speakers ensure that they are written in a font and colour that are easier to read for those with dyslexia or other reading/learning difficulties. Another consideration is to ensure a sufficiently large font size and font colour contrast with the background, to help people with visual impairments. Images should be provided with a description. If possible, share slides as well as recordings (noting any copyright implications).
- Present your work openly, **inviting** questions and comments. If there are sections you would specifically like feedback on, or that you would like to expand on further if there is time, indicate these during your presentation. An authoritative, close-ended presentation does not invite questions.
- If you receive a question or comment that you perceive to be inappropriate or challenging, take time before you answer it, and don't always assume that it is meant to be hostile. You are always welcome to say that you'll take the point under advisement, and leave it there.

### Guidance for Audiences

Always make sure that your questions are constructive and supportive, even if you disagree with the argument of the paper or don't think the research is ready for sharing. Here are some examples of constructive questions:

- **The supportive question:** Audiences can be silent for lots of reasons, so we appreciate the kindly souls who break the ice. We like questions that show you have actually listened to the presentation or read the precirculated paper, and those that address a specific point. Don't be afraid to ask for clarification – this gets the speaker to engage and explain, and can be particularly useful for researchers at the start of a project.
- **The selfless question:** The questioner who focuses on a speaker's research is immeasurably more helpful than one who dwells on their own. Even better are questions that compare the work of several panellists. These turn the conversation into a three-way discussion between the questioner, the speakers on the panel and the audience.
- **The practical recommendation:** Everybody loves this question: we need to know what we have missed in the primary and secondary sources. But phrase it positively, please. Don't demand to know why the speaker has omitted classic work a, b, or c. It's far better to ask: "Have you consulted such and such? It reinforces your argument."
- **The think-outside-the-box prompt:** We like to look at our work from new perspectives, so these questions are always welcome. It shouldn't feel like an attack, however. Nor should it be about the

questioner's own work. Ask us to think about a specific comparative case, or comment that our findings may be reflected in other fields or time periods – not only does this challenge preconceptions in a useful way, it may help us to think about expanding our work in new directions.

- **The tell-me-what-else-you-know question:** We all cut lots out of our papers. Very often, speakers comment on this while delivering a paper, partly because we are so desperate to point out that we haven't missed something obvious. So we love an opportunity to flesh out details and demonstrate the depth of our research.
- **The I-couldn't-disagree-more question:** What should you say when your disagreement is genuine and large – so much so that downplaying it would be an injustice to your intelligence and the speaker's? Staying civil is hugely important in this situation, so keep it brief. Try, as Jane Austen put it, to “unite civility and truth in a few short sentences”. Register your dissent and the reasoning behind it without taking up too much time (or unleashing strong emotions). If your point is widely shared in the room, you won't need to labour it; if it is not, a lengthy intervention will not win you many converts. You can always discuss your issues after the session. We don't necessarily want everyone to agree with us and praise us (although that can be nice). We want the audience to take us seriously, whatever career stage we are at. That means not dismissing speakers because they are in the early days of their research and have not yet read seminal works. Similarly, those of us at the other end of the spectrum need to be challenged on new approaches and techniques. Early-career scholars can offer much here, even if nervous about questioning senior academics.