A guide to conference roles

#BISA2025 will see delegates presenting their research, chairing sessions, acting as discussants, and attending panels and roundtables as audience members. Please take time to read our 'guide to conference roles' to ensure #BISA2025 is a welcoming, kind, and intellectually stimulating space for everyone.

Chair

The chair is responsible for time keeping and moderating discussion. The success of a panel or roundtable often depends upon the chair's ability to restrict the length of speakers' presentations and manage questions from the floor.

Some of the most important responsibilities of the chair are to:

- Enquire, on behalf of discussants and other presenters about the status and expected completion date of papers/presentations;
- Make contact with all participants in the panel or roundtable ahead of the conference, and arrange in advance with all participants the order of speaking and time limits;
- Arrive early to the session or room to re-confirm with all participants the order of speaking and the time limits, as follows: For panels with four presenters and a discussant, 10 minutes per speaker and 10 minutes for discussants is appropriate. If there are five speakers without a discussant, 12 minutes per speaker is appropriate. For other permutations of panel member composition, presentations from presenters/discussants should conclude with at least 30 minutes remaining for general discussion. In consultation with panel conveners, flexibility should be exercised for innovative panel structures.
- Start the session at the scheduled time by introducing the title of the session and all of its presenters (names and institutional affiliations);
- Maintain strict time limits for each speaker and discussant in accordance with individual allocations;
- Moderate panel and/or floor discussions;
- Ensure (to the greatest extent possible) that everyone who wishes to participate in the discussion has an opportunity to do so. This may require collecting sets of questions from the floor.
- Familiarise yourself with the BISA conference Code of Conduct and – if necessary – intervene in session discussions if unacceptable comments are made. Chairs can also request individuals to leave the room if unacceptable comments continue or escalate. Chairs are expected to report such incidents to the BISA Director, Juliet Dryden: juliet.dryden@bisa.ac.uk
- Adjourn the session on time to allow the room to clear before the next session begins.

Discussants

The discussant is not the 'main attraction' of the panel; they should identify and comment upon links, shared themes, key questions, original contributions, significance, and/or areas of divergence amongst papers on a panel. Ideally, a discussant should situate their remarks in a context broad enough to spark questions and the interest of an audience that typically has not read the papers.

The following are suggested areas for discussants' remarks:

- Given that the audience may not have read the papers, it is helpful to begin by stating the major contributions of the papers and identifying their stronger or more interesting features;
- Note areas where the papers might be further developed;
- Ask one or two brief questions of each paper giver;
- Identify any links between the papers;
- Commentaries should be no more than 10 minutes in length, preferably less;
- Commentaries should not provide in-depth peer reviews of papers. Such feedback is best given via email.

It is up to the discretion of the discussant whether they will provide more substantive written feedback to the presenters via email. Any presenter wishing to receive this kind of feedback should make a request to the discussant well in advance of the conference. Also note that as a discussant, one may decline to discuss any paper that is received in insufficient time for one to read and prepare comments on it.

Presenters

The following are guidelines for delivering a paper presentation:

- Confirm with the panel chair how long you will have to present prior to the conference. Note that presentations at BISA are generally between 10-12 minutes in length and certainly no more than 15 minutes;
- Arrive early at the session to confirm with the chair the order of speaking and the time limits. Upload any PowerPoint slides/AV material as required;
- Ideally, papers should not be read verbatim. When reading a paper, there is the danger a presenter may need to finish before reaching the most significant aspects of the presentation, and you will better engage with the audience if you talk from notes;
- Highlights of the paper should be given in line with the norms of your subfield and approach. These may include the purpose of the study, the method of analysis, the major findings, and any conclusions or recommendations. The amount of time devoted to each highlight may vary depending upon the author's evaluation of the importance of each area. Long descriptive summaries of existing literature and/or theoretical frameworks should be avoided;
- Read some [pointers on presenting research in a short time frame](#);
- Less experienced presenters are advised to prepare a "reading text" to help guide their presentation. On average people speak at around 130 words per minute but this can increase or decrease during times of stress.

Audience

The audience is an important part of the panel experience, and following a few common sense guidelines will help make the panel an enjoyable and productive experience for everybody:

- Listen attentively to the presenters and discussants – the norm at BISA is to leave questions/comments to the end of the session, under the direction of the chair;
- During the question-and-answer time, keep questions focused and on-point – do not grandstand;
- If offering a critique, do so constructively in the spirit of improving the work and in line with the BISA conference Code of Conduct;
- Ideally, questions ought to be distributed evenly across panels. Thus, do take the opportunity to engage with the work of a panellist who has not yet been asked a question.