

### **Tips for being an effective online Chair**

Prior to the world changing in 2020, the Regional Studies Association had started to adventure into the unfamiliar waters of online meetings. We had held a pilot hybrid Student and Early Career Conference in 2019, and our plans for a fully hybrid repeat in 2020 was sadly cancelled due to the onrush of the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns.

So for the RSA, as with many people, the last couple of years have turned what was once a gentle incline of learning how to run an online meeting into a steep learning curve of online meetings, AGMs, webinars and full-blown eFestivals. We have worked hard to ensure that all our events are engaging, inclusive and professional, and have learnt much along the way.

With our second Regions in Recovery eFestival coming up at the end of March, we would like to share some of the best practice we have learned about being the Chair of an online session. We are sharing this prior to our forthcoming eFestival at the end of March to help support anyone might be new to chairing, whether this is in our online conference, or future meetings and webinars.

Please do let us know if you have any other tips and ideas for chairing effectively that you want to share.

#### **Before the session**

- We recommend that you install the Zoom platform as a standalone app as this gives you more options in terms of views. The RSA staff are always on hand during online rehearsals and sessions to provide support and assistance if you are unfamiliar with the software.
- Chairing online sessions is far more enjoyable without distractions caused by technical difficulties. We always encourage our Chairs and Speakers to attend the pre-event rehearsal that we organise. I would encourage you to ask your event organiser to arrange a rehearsal before the real event. This gives you (and the speakers) opportunity to meet ahead slightly more informally and check that your sound, video and screen-sharing all function as expected.
- During the rehearsal, it is worth check the correct pronunciation of speakers' names and give them opportunity to let you know how they prefer to be introduced and addressed.
- It is worth liaising with the speakers ahead of time to organise the running order and session format. There is also opportunity to do this during any rehearsal you might attend.

- We encourage speakers to share their presentations with the Chair ahead of the session to give you advance notice of what to expect, and maybe prepare a few questions in advance. We also ask Speakers to share a back up of their presentation with the organisers in case of technical difficulties on the day.
- RSA sessions are normally recorded, edited and made available to watch on-demand for RSA members. If speakers have requested that their part is not recorded, the RSA staff team will edit out or pause the recording as required.
- The RSA team will always ask Chairs and Speakers to join the session at least 15 minutes before the start. This gives ample time to solve any last minute problems and gives everyone opportunity to be relaxed and calm for the start.

### **During the session**

- Begin the session by introducing yourself and giving a brief overview of the session. If you are in a meeting format, ensure that participants know how they can put questions to the speakers. It is worth reminding participants to use the Q&A box for questions (in webinars) or, in meetings, precede questions in the Chat box with a 'Q' to allow you to see questions more easily.
- Remind people that in meetings that are recorded, if they keep their camera off, they will not be on the final recording.
- Remind people to keep their microphones muted unless you, in your Chair capacity, have specifically asked them to unmute.
- Timekeeping is essential to effective chairing, whether online or in person. The Chair should lead the way in making sure that the speakers adhere to timings and in case of severe overrun, interject to remind a speaker about time limitations. Sometimes a session can overrun at the end, and the Chair should notify participants that you are aware of the overrun (and have not just forgotten). It is worth checking before the beginning of the session that speakers and organisers are happy for a few minutes overrun if required.
- Managing the online discussion is a key element of effective chairing, and the Chair monitors the written Chat (or the Q&A box in webinars). The RSA team will support any participant who has technical problems raised in the Chat box, so the Chair can concentrate on comments and questions.
- We encourage Chairs to frequently reiterate where questions can be added (in Chat or Q&A boxes). If required, the Chair, speakers or member of the RSA team can add an early question to help encourage participants to contribute questions.
- During discussions, the Chair should take the initiative and direct questions to specific speakers (using their name). This helps engage all the speakers and avoids discussions becoming too niche or exclusionary. You might wish to combine several related questions in to one or ask the same question to each speaker. As Chat and

Q&A boxes are not recorded, it is worth verbalising the question to the speakers so there is context to their answers.

- Keep in mind the diversity of participants when selecting questions to answer.
- Zoom polls, or software such as Slido or Mentimeter, can be useful to facilitate discussion but need to be pre-organised with the speakers and organisers.
- During Zoom meetings, participants have not only the option of using the Chat box, but they can also be asked to unmute themselves and ask their question directly. If a participant chooses to use the Chat box, avoid calling on them to ask their question aloud. If a participant has just written 'Q' and no question, you can ask them to unmute and speak their question.
- Online discussions and debates require focussed attention by the Chairs, but they also provide opportunities for open the debate to a wider audience. Encourage participants to disseminate the discussion on social media. All RSA sessions come with an accompanying Twitter # and the Chair can encourage people to join the online conversation.

### **Ending the meeting**

- When the session ends, there can sometimes be unanswered questions. The Chair (with permission from the speakers) can ask participants to communicate directly with them, and provided the speakers are comfortable with this, the Chair should ensure that attendees are aware of how they can contact the speakers outside of the session.
- The Chair should close with a statement that summarises the different insights offered over the course of the session. This can be an effective way to leave attendees thoughts about what might follow on from the session.
- The Chair should thank everyone, including the speakers and participants, and signpost the next event scheduled by the organisers or speakers.
- Remind participants that they can offer feedback to the RSA about our events via email or, following the eFestival, via an evaluation form. All feedback helps us to understand what our membership and wider community would benefit from and how we can improve our online events.
- The Chair plays an important role in giving the RSA Zoom Host clear indication that the session is over. The RSA will ask you to say 'Goodbye' to end the session.

We hope you find these guidelines helpful in preparing for the RSA eFestival and for the online activities you will engage in this coming academic year.