

How to organise seminars

With the JEF Europe Secretariat

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Introduction

The following guide is based on my experience organising a European seminar with the JEF Europe secretariat in February 2015. JEF Poland was approached to host it in December 2014 and had 2,5 months before the seminar was to commence to make sure everything was in order. Due to the Christmas break, we only started putting everything together in January, therefore we had to find our own modus operandi quickly. Even though this was a seminar for only 30 people, I came to realise that size does not matter whilst organising, because you'll still have to do everything no matter the quantity, the only thing that matters is the quality. Ioan the Secretary General was very helpful throughout the entire process and was the main contact point between JEF Poland and the JEF Europe Secretariat. We also had help from some of the interns who were at the office.

After reading this guide, you should have sufficient knowledge on all the organisational aspects that are required to put together a seminar. After organising one, you'll be hooked and will want to organise another! At least that's my thinking whilst preparing to organise the spring 2016 FC in Cracow.



The basics

It's crucial to divide the workload accordingly to avoid arguments in the future or worst yet, the work not being done. It's advisable to play to one's strengths and do what you know how to do. For the seminar, the JEF Secretariat handled the payments and obtained the funding grant, found competent trainers and participants, and created the schedule. JEF Poland was tasked with the logistics.



Logistics

1. Accommodation

This will be what the bulk of your budget will go towards. Make sure to distribute the rooms between the same gender participants, unless specifically requested otherwise. Based on the amount of money you have, you can decide whether the participants will be sleeping in:

a. Hostels/Dorms:

They are inexpensive and you can usually decrease the price by inserting more beds into rooms. Make sure to check whether the price is per room or per bed. Talking from experience, it's advisable to go bed testing if possible to see whether the hostel is as good as described on the internet. You should make it your priority to check whether breakfast is included into the price and whether the rooms are en-suite, if they are not, to check the communal shower facilities. Hostels have the added benefit, that once you pay, no one looks too closely on what's going. Some are also quite small, therefore renting out the entire hostel just for the participants could be a possibility.

b. Hotels:

For the seminar, we were fortunate enough to just choose between a 3 and a 4 star

hotel. If you have the money, making people comfortable is an added bonus. No one will be complaining that their bed is too soft, or that they've enjoyed using the swimming pool and the sauna. Unfortunately, having the means for such luxuries is not often possible. Don't cross them off from the list before you check the latest deals. It might just be that such sites as [booking.com](https://www.booking.com) or [groupon.com](https://www.groupon.com) are having an up to 50% sale on accommodation. If the grant allows you to use third parties for accommodation, then go for it, although make sure to triple check the terms, because some grants do not allow for this. If the money is solely coming from participation fees, and there is enough of it, then there really is no question about what you should do.

c. Alternative facilities:

Depending on how the seminar is being financed, you might be forced to find alternative accommodation on behalf of a few participants. Looking at [AirBnB.com](https://www.airbnb.com) is a good start, although the prices are often not that much cheaper than a hostel. Perhaps asking people to bring their own sleeping bags and inflatable mattresses for the additional night who are strapped for cash, can be a rather good call. Having a sleepover on someone's floor can be an efficient way of reducing the costs; it's all about how you pitch the idea to the participants!

2. Food

Food is the most tricky aspect of organising seminars. The general rule is that breakfast can be eaten cold, lunch has to be warm, whilst dinner should be warm. Meals can be divided into the following categories:

a. Buying products:

This would mostly apply to breakfast. Should the accommodation not cater for breakfast, or the amount they are asking for it is too much, it will be your job to make sure that no one starts the day on an empty stomach. Simply buy the necessary products and make sandwiches out of them. This will be a lot less expensive than paying for breakfast, although it depends on how early you want to get up to make breakfast for everyone, as well as whether there is a place and a fridge to store the necessary materials.

b. Ordering in:

This is advisable for lunch, especially when the sessions are running late and there is

no time to walk to a place where you can eat and still keep within the set schedule. Most restaurants do meal deals and even give you a discount with group orders which just need to be delivered. Make sure to have black bags ready for trash. Whilst it makes no difference to the cooks how many different dishes you order in advance, it can get messy when the participants don't recall what they picked for lunch. If you do decide to let the participants decide individually what they wish to eat, make sure you have an organised system to avoid chaos.

c. Going out:

This is the toughest meal to organise, because it means that the venue has to hold all of the participants who need to get there on time. Make sure to make it clear to everyone what is included in the meal for which you'll pay for, as to insure that you aren't left with a larger bill than planned. The most common obstacle with going to a restaurant to eat is people ordering additional items and then not paying for them. If you are going to be paying in a different currency, double check the prices with the service providers instead of using today's exchange rate.

3. Venue

This is the place where the participants will spend most of their time. The venue should be close to the accommodation and easy to find. If the seminar is in winter, make sure the venue is heated; if it's in the summer, make sure the windows can open. It's crucial for wifi to be present which can support everyone using it at the same time during coffee breaks. The room(s) should be well lit and have power sockets. Some venues charge more for weekends, make sure to take that into account when drafting your budget. There are a few options from which you can choose the right venue:

a. Conference rooms:

These can either be at the accommodation which offers conference packages, or privately rented facilities. When booking the former, they usually come with overpriced coffee breaks and don't allow for food and drinks not provided by them to be brought into the premises. They will usually also come with lunch. The latter, can be a hit or a miss, so make sure you've seen the room beforehand. Privately rented rooms are usually only for conferences, have projectors, and you are just left with a key instead of anyone from the staff being nearby to help. You might be asked to cover the cost for the cleaners afterwards, therefore make sure you read those terms and conditions thoroughly to not go over the budget.

b. Libraries/museums/town halls:

Even though they are not the intuitive venues you would start your search with, they are the ones I would recommend the most. Most public institutions have very nice inexpensive rooms to rent and they come with less strings attached than the options in "a". They allow you to organise your own coffee breaks and lunches, as well as hook you up with a good internet connection. Such buildings are usually well located and have a reputation to keep, therefore will be very helpful with everything.

4. Coffee breaks

This is the one aspect where you can be very creative and which can clog the hidden costs hole. The essentials:

a. Munchie food:

This is the in-between meals food. Crackers, cookies, sweets, fruits and pretzels are recommended, because they are solid enough that they don't require plates and don't leave a seeable amount of crumbs. Avoid crisps, because they are problematic due to getting moist quickly and require everyone to put their hands inside the same bowls which leads to a high exchange of bacteria. Leave notes next to the food asking people to keep it tidy - you running around with a broom pretending to be Cinderella can only happen so many times a day.

b. Beverages:

They will be split into hot and cold drinks. You should have instant coffee, milk (the standard semi-skimmed which you keep in a fridge), sugar or sugar cubes, as well as at least 3 different teas. The cold beverages should include plenty of still water, at least two different fruit juices and at least one fizzy drink such as coke or sprite. Make sure you have a sufficient amount of plastic cups for the cold drinks and paper cups or porcelain for the hot drinks.

c. Accessories:

- Black bags for the trash
- Serviettes
- Plastic plates for the coffee break
- Plastic cups are easily disposable and inexpensive to buy for cold drinks
- Paper cups are disposable, whilst porcelain requires constant washing

- Plastic cutlery for the cake and a sharp knife for cutting it
- Water boiler is the hardest part to organise for the coffee break. If you don't have one already, make sure to book it for hot water which will be used for tea and coffee.

Here is the equation for the required water boiler capacity:

Amount of participants X volume of a cup = required size in litres

d. Pastries:

Cakes, muffins and cupcakes can help with the budget being slightly higher than expected. Set aside money for the pastries, and if you have ran into unforeseen costs, cut the calories and don't buy the pastries. If however you do have the funds to buy them, purchasing some pastries for the coffee break is a good idea. A farewell cake for the very end is an added bonus.

5. Social events and cultural programme

Whilst the organisers aren't usually expected to organise the social programme which is often not included in the participation fee, it's always good to have a few ideas for what can be put together as a back up or when the grant allows for such expenses:

a. Daytime activities:

These are the activities which can only be done during the day due to the strict opening hours. They might need to be booked in advance should guided tours be requested. Organising such activities during the day is a bit problematic, because the free time that is planned is usually in the evening after the day's sessions have ended. However should there be enough free time, or better yet, should the activity be in the schedule as a cultural trip, here are a few ideas:

- Historical buildings such as palaces
- Historically significant places
- Museums
- Monuments
- Pro-European institutions
- Embassies
- Team-building escape games
- Bike trips

b. Nighttime activities:

- Clubs

- Pubs/bars
- Karaoke
- Scavenger hunts

c. Day and night:

- Theatre
- Ice skating
- Wine tasting is a good loophole in grants which don't cover alcohol with food, but can cover culturally enriching experiences such as learning more about wine

6. Transport

The best method and also the trickiest, is to organise everything within a walking distance. This way, you don't have the added cost of bus/train/tram/metro tickets, and it's less likely that anyone will get lost on their way from point A to point B. Should you be able to organise a seminar within a reasonable walking distance (max 25 minutes on foot according to google maps), there will be few complaints from people who dress up and wear heels and/or want to sleep in late. Make sure to hand out maps with accurate directions.



Here is the info kit I did for the seminar in Cracow which contains all the necessary information for the participants: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/2eo2vrfld7ctcs8/Infokit%20Cracow%20.pdf?dl=0>



Sit back and relax, you've got this!



This guide has got your back.

