

MEMO FOR DISCUSSION OF COVID-19 ISSUE AND SRN2020 AT EC MARCH MEETING

Assessment of situation (as of Sunday 15 March 2020)

- All 35 countries delegates come from have been affected by now, some in a very significant way;
- At least 7 have closed borders and/or banned flights from some/all countries;
- Almost all 35 countries have introduced some form of lockdown, plus quarantining for incoming visitors, and self-isolation;
- Universities from almost all 35 countries have suspended all travel abroad until at least end of April or indefinitely;
- Insurances (both via university or private) are not guaranteeing cover anymore or refusing flat out at the moment.

Forecast

- According to reliable data (whose sources I have now narrowed down to WHO and the CSSE at Johns Hopkins Uni), the peak is yet to come in most countries and is to be expected between now and May, perhaps even June/July, depending on the country;
- Other projections seem to indicate a risk in some countries (including the UK) for the outbreak to last until or have a double peak into the Autumn, or to subside by the Summer to then come back in the Winter.
- Unfortunately, the current position of UK authorities is causing more uncertainty.

Possible scenarios for SRN2020

For now, I plan to inform all delegates that everything will be put on a holding pattern until at least the end of April. Then, 4 scenarios seem possible, with varying degrees of viability:

1. **September 2020 confirmed.** With no little optimism, the emergency subsides globally (and, critically, in the UK) within a couple of months and restrictions/bans are lifted. However, several issues will have to be taken into due and careful consideration:
 - o All colleagues/delegates will have to face exceptional situations at their own universities – e.g. having to reschedule courses, terms, workloads, etc. – in many cases well into the Summer;
 - o People will still be worried until the emergency is completely over, and understandably so;
 - o Will we have adequate critical mass? How many will still be able/willing to commit and have enough time to prepare adequately? Three delegates have already informed me in the last couple of days that they will no longer attend, no matter what;
 - o Will there be certainty that, even in case the peak is over by late Spring, there won't be another escalation by September?
 - o The risk of a low turnout is real and the atmosphere/quality of the conference could be compromised;

- Others, who cannot make the commitment and have to give up, might feel excluded if we proceed anyway – which is the opposite of what SRN2020 set out to be (i.e. about inclusivity);
- On my end, everything will have to be organized between June and August:
 - Will I have enough time?
 - Over the Summer months Oxford Brookes's priority will be to restore business as usual in order to assure a regular start of the new academic year for new and returning students after a semester of severe disruption: will the conference be considered a priority? Will all campus services (including security and catering) be available as normal?
 - Crucially, will I be able to ensure the wellbeing of all delegates given the circumstances?
 - If turnout is lower than expected, this will inevitably mean financial losses.

2. **Postpone by a few months (to January 2021).** This would be the only other time in the academic calendar when it is possible to reschedule as it falls in-between terms and therefore the only time when we can secure rooms and services for the conference.

- Would people attend in January?
- Even assuming so, this means we would have two conferences in 2021:
 - Will people still go to Vienna too seven months later?
 - Or would Oxford in January compromise attendance in Vienna?

3. **Postpone to September 2021.** This would mean skipping 2020 but:

- It would avoid the issues mentioned above;
- The outbreak and the emergency will have subsided by then;
- Vienna has already offered to move their conference to October 2022; Missouri should be able to push theirs forward to 2023 and Rio is okay to move theirs to 2024;
- Protocols:
 - Same conference theme
 - Possible dates: 1-4 September or, more likely, 8-11 September
 - Delegates already shortlisted are automatically confirmed but will have to confirm their intention to attend in 2021
 - Should some delegates decline, a new CfP can be issued to top up numbers by accepting other delegates who did not submit last December
 - New deadlines to be set up for all stages
 - Reimbursement system to be put in place (where and when necessary)
 - Keynotes will be re-invited but we will need confirmation of their availability, which might take time to get
 - We will have to skip the SRN Awards 2020 and allow submissions over a two-year span until May 2021
 - We may have to extend the mandate of the current EC by one year until September 2021 ex officio or by e-consultation with members. Without conference, the elections might not be possible to manage.

4. **Cancel SRN2020.** It's an option but:

- This would have significant financial impact on my School as we have covered substantial upfront costs (for deposits, bookings, etc.) some of which will not be refundable;
- As a result of the above, this could have an impact on my career and standing within the School.

Virtual conference: I have put a lot of thinking into this, and I have come to the conclusion that unfortunately as things stand this is not a viable option due to a number of practical reasons: the sheer scale of the conference, the short timeframe available to rethink a whole new conference format with no precedent to rely on, and the fact that it is very unlikely, if not a near zero probability, that my university will be able to give me assurance that all the necessary tech resources will be available for this.