

Cambridge international conference 2016 report

The conference was hosted by the British Focusing Association, from which 5 members came together to form the organising committee – Kay Hoffmann, Jerry Conway, Manju, Locana and Peter Afford. We were joined by Maymay Knight who acted as the conference administrator during the 9 months or so leading up to it.

We met in person a number of times, in Cambridge and in London, and had skype calls to keep in touch in between. Some other people took on the job of organising specific parts of the conference, such as the coordinators meeting. This kept the committee to a very manageable size, and it was generally quite easy to make decisions together.

We gave ourselves 3 years to organise the conference. We booked Robinson College as the venue within 6 months, and the dinner at Kings a little later.

The conference website was launched immediately after the Seattle conference the year before, and we developed it as we went along. We have kept it up after the conference so that conference ‘proceedings’ (papers and reports) are available in one place – also a good collection of photos and the wonderful feedback we received.

We paid Maymay to do the admin work, budgeting for 200 hours of her time and ending up paying her for 250 hours. There is always more to do than you think there will be.

We used the venue’s own booking and payment system for a small fee per person, which made our job a lot easier as they handled most of the money.

Financially, this was a big project, with a total turnover of nearly £200k. Most of the money went straight to the venue, and the rest of it came to us on behalf of the BFA, so we had a sizeable budget to manage. In the end, we were left with a surplus, and were able to make donations to TIFI, the European website, Focusing Initiatives International, and to the Woodland Trust for tree planting as a symbolic gesture to compensate for the carbon emissions generated by all the plane travel involved. We were also able to give refunds to everyone who had to cancel.

After recent conferences in Europe (Switzerland, Germany, Netherlands) had sold all their places at a little over 200, we felt that it was possible that up to 250 people would want to attend this one. In the event, we had 260 registrations, plus a number of people attending for one or two days only, plus we had some cancellations from people disappointed at being unable to come.

At this sort of size, organising the conference was a major undertaking that required careful thought and planning. We ran into one or two complications, such as helping the Chinese focusers to come to the UK – supporting their visa applications and helping the venue take their registrations and payments.

We gave 11 scholarship places, mainly to people coming from countries with poor economies and long distances to travel. The scholarship fund was a mix of contributions from participants made when they paid for their places, and an amount from the general budget from the fees paid. In the end, most people from outside the UK who asked for a scholarship were offered one.

The programme had one hour for Focusing on most days, and there was a ‘Focusing corner’ where people could go to find a partner to focus with. The rest of the time was filled mainly with interest groups and workshops. The interest groups were formed by people offering to run them, and by our inviting well-known teachers in certain areas. The number of workshop proposals was almost exactly the number that we had spaces for! though we did restrict participants to offering only one workshop each. One afternoon was set aside for ‘pop up’ workshops and other meetings for anyone who wished to facilitate something spontaneously outside the planned programme.

The conference succeeded in reaching out to people who were not able to be present – through Zoom meetings and video link-ups during workshops.

Finally, we look forward to more international conferences! We had a lot of fun organising this one, and it was a real privilege to serve the international community in this way. You could not wish for a more friendly or responsive group of people than the worldwide focusing community. A tidal wave of good energy and feelings from around the world carries you along.

I found this a very enjoyable and rewarding experience, involving plenty of ‘fast focusing on complex felt senses about complicated situations’! So I hope others will take the leap and organise conferences. You have the support of a lot of people around the world in doing so, and I will be very happy to talk to you about my experience if you would like that – I found it immensely helpful to speak with people who had organised these conferences in the past.