

Is it time to organise a seminar on how to organise seminars?



These days everywhere you turn, you see and hear about seminars, conferences and workshops. But very few of these add value by contributing to improving the quality of debate, programme implementation or the policy process. It is time to organise a seminar on how to organise a seminar, argues Shri Suresh Kumar.

Introduction

Though I have attended several seminars, workshops and conferences and came back disappointed, I never thought of writing about it, till I read Dr R M Prasad's recent meeting note in AESA (<http://www.aesa-gfras.net/Resources/file/FINAL-AESA%20My%20Meeting%20Notes-Bangalore-18DEC.pdf>). Dr Prasad wrote about his experiences of participation in an extension conference recently in this meeting note and a few extension scientists commented on his note. As I did not attend this conference, I can't speak for the conduct of that event. My views and suggestions are based on my own experience of attending workshops and seminars. It would not be fair to single out agriculture or agricultural extension here. Comments are valid for such events organised in every sector.



Dr Prasad's note raised several interesting points especially those aimed at improving the quality of deliberations and recommendations. These include the need for specifying outcomes (leading to focussed recommendations including areas for future research); emphasising quality over quantity; proper time management; encouraging young researchers and the need for adopting innovative approaches for organising such events. Those who commented on this meeting note broadly agreed with the thrust of Dr Prasad's arguments and his constructive criticism and also made specific observations on lack of rigour in extension research (including lack of research competencies) and on the need for innovative approaches in conducting such events (Box 1).

The discussions mainly covered three broad but inter-related issues, namely, improving the quality of extension research (including the quality of Post Graduate Research), enhancing the capability of extension faculty and improving the conduct of workshops, seminars and conferences.

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aesa **MY MEETING NOTES**

International Conference on "Extension Educational Strategies for Sustainable Agricultural Development – A Global Perspective"
5-8 December 2013
University of Agricultural Sciences, Bangalore &
International Society of Extension Education



There has been a spurt in the number of conferences and workshops related to extension in the recent past. Many of these fail to have any impact due to lack of clarity on its objectives and the way it is conducted. The recent International Conference on "Extension Educational Strategies for Sustainable Agricultural Development- A Global Perspective" organised at Bangalore during December 5-8, 2013 was one such event. Dr R. M. Prasad who was a lead speaker at this conference reflects on his experiences at this event and argues for adopting innovative approaches in organising similar conferences.

All these aspects are critical not only for extension but also for all disciplines, as a nation cannot develop beyond the capability of its faculty. *If I was to name one item which is most crucial for national development, I would unhesitatingly name quality of faculty as this determines quality of both education and research, the two pillars of growth.*

Box 1: Comments on Dr Prasad's Meeting Note on the International Conference on extension (December 2013, Bangalore)

Both Professor S V N Rao and Dr Sivakumar pointed out to the need for more rigorous selection of abstracts and reduction in number of abstracts and presentations to have more focussed deliberations in such professional meetings. Both of them also argued for shifting the attention of the organisers of the events from organising food, accommodation and transport of large number of participants (which is happening currently) to enhancing quality of presentations, discussions and recommendations.

Dr Saravanan Raj, Dr Lenin Venu and Dr Sivakumar argued for giving more opportunities for presentation to young researchers and PhD students, instead of pushing them to poster sessions. Professor Rao also highlighted the need for improving research capability among the faculty as a pre-requisite for improving research quality.

The importance of a doctoral colloquium in such seminars, workshop and conference was highlighted by Dr Sivakumar. He also indicated the need for organising an interactive session with the editors of top rated journals. While agreeing to the analysis of Dr Prasad, Dr Mahesh Chander observed that he is looking forward to an ideal extension conference as a model to follow.

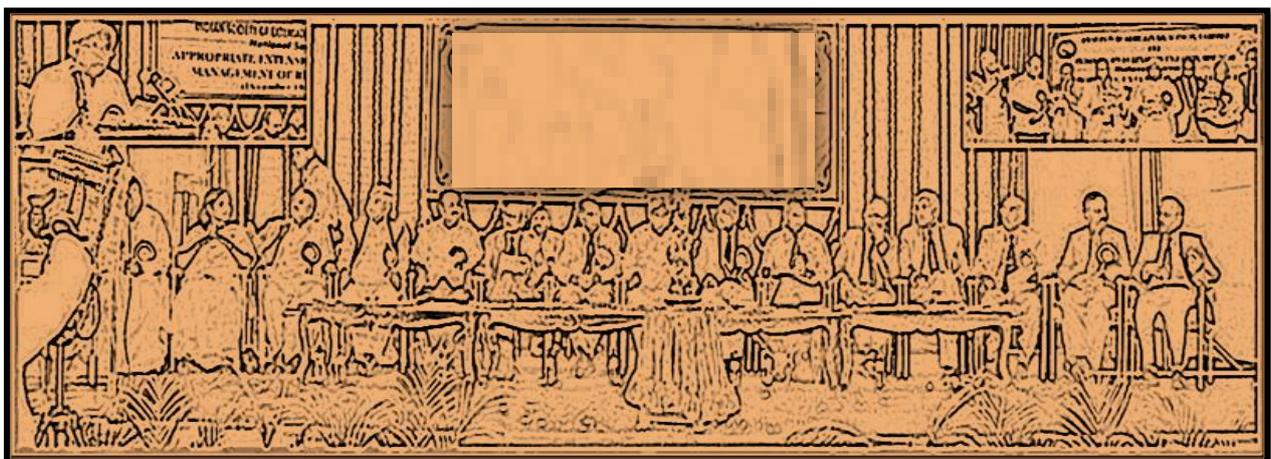
Improving the quality of extension research

It is high time for universities and research centres to have their own Research Master Plan and a Community of Practice (CoP) around each of the research themes. The research program may be finalised jointly by education, extension and research wings. I believe that this mechanism is already in place in most cases. Same may be fine-tuned and internalised. Every research (student as well as faculty research) should contribute to this agenda. Subject of the thesis may be selected from out of the Research Master Plan. Each student research program may be part of a long term research project. Format of student research needs to be structured so that every research project could fit in the research master plan.

Themes: There is need for formulating theme wise issues and concerns in extension needing co-development. This “directory of issues and themes” needs to be uploaded on a platform such as “Extensionpedia” so that every stakeholder could contribute to this list of themes. This was also mentioned by Dr Prasad as an illustration of the seminar outcome. This list may be finalised at a national seminar to which senior functionaries from Planning Commission and Ministries may be invited. Authorities using the inputs and providing funding also need to be consulted for their inputs so that the directory represents the concerns of every stakeholder including, practitioners, faculty, senior managers and policy makers. This shall ensure that the themes represent the national need. Each seminar, workshop and consultation and even research study could use this directory to firm up the theme/s of their event and research.

Objectives and Participants: One or more objectives need to be clearly spelled out. The objectives could be development of themes, assisting PhD and MSc students and researchers, exposure to new ideas, improving education etc. The nature of participants from diverse backgrounds needs to be considered carefully in line with the objectives of the event. There are good reasons to restrict participation to have sufficient time for quality deliberations. In some cases there could be adequate reasons for ensuring wider participation from a variety of sources that could provide synergy. The objectives should determine the number as well as the nature of participants. . To maximise benefits, the proceedings could be broadcast as in case of medical conferences. Teaching videos could be prepared for colleges and professionals. Workshop papers should ideally serve as a text book for the subject and may be made available on the website.

Workshop papers: In my blog on “Extensionpedia” I had suggested that for each theme in extension, a base theme paper may be uploaded for co-development by CoPs and the theme paper finalised after a national workshop of each CoPs. This co-developed theme paper could form the base consultation paper for all seminars, workshops and conferences. The workshop papers should be related to these themes and should contribute to adding and modifying the contents. These papers could be also dropped in a drop box of the particular theme and be also uploaded. The workshop organisers could use the theme paper and also the additional papers related to this theme. This workshop may result in a revised anchor paper which may be then uploaded for co-development. One option for ensuring quality of papers and allow wider participation is to evolve the concept of Paper Bank - theme-wise pre-approved papers de-linking papers for consideration in specific workshops. A Paper Bank could be prepared for each theme. Organisers could select papers from the paper bank. Contributors could also offer pre-approved papers for various seminars.



Though very important dignitaries and policy makers are invited to the inaugural sessions, who could both enrich the seminar and benefit from it, these sessions are often consumed in addresses and welcome ceremonies , both dignitaries and participants losing out in the process.

Inaugural session: Participation of dignitaries is important as the participants would like to know the thinking of international, national and state level decision makers and experts about their long standing concerns, their thinking about the future and also to interact with them. This however, does not happen due to the limited time available to the dignitaries which is consumed by inaugural addresses and welcome ceremonies. Welcome ceremonies could be made short and the time could be used more optimally as the time of dignitaries will always be limited. The participants who come from long distances and have rich experience would like to interact with the dignitaries but the same is not possible both due to shortage of time and there being no provision for it in the inaugural session. Provision for reactions of participants need to be included in the inaugural session. Ideally priority may be given to participants who send the list of questions in advance.

Everyone's and my own experience regarding time management in most seminars is the same (Box 2). If the power points slides are made available in advance, the participants could read the same before the session starts and this would help in finding more time for discussions. This should be default option. It would also compel the participants to come prepared. Time management of academic events is something all academics need to ponder both for optimal use of their time and more importantly for the respect and sanctity of the academics and the academic discipline.

Box 2: Time Management

Organisers invite policy makers and decision makers and well known names in the discipline because they enrich the program and it reflects on the image of the seminar. The opening session comprising opinion and decision makers consumes a lot of time after which they leave and attendance thins out depriving participants of opportunity to interact. Many participants leave by the time of final session.

Experts invited to participate in these events need to be allowed enough time to enrich the seminar and their number determined by available time and expected role. If too many are invited they cannot be allowed enough time. The Chair is then compelled to ration time and keep reminding them to finish presentation quickly like a policeman regulating crowds or rapid fire talk shows. Continuous pressing of bell by the chair rather than academic discussion then becomes the most distinguishing feature of technical sessions.

Plenary session (which is perhaps the most important) often doesn't have time to build consensus. This session usually starts late and is also consumed by dignitaries delivering their addresses. There is not enough time to finalise recommendations which are often finalised after the workshop is over. Sometimes the time taken to come out with the recommendations is very long as the organising team members have to attend to normal work and clear the backlog of work that has piled up during the workshop.

The recommendations are then sent to concerned authorities (when the issues may no longer be relevant and those who attend these events may not be in position or may not recollect the discussions and may have lost interest) and it will remain as one among the mountain of documents waiting for their attention. The opportunity of their presence is lost, probably for ever.

Ideally the inaugural session should be devoted to review of action taken on previous recommendations which should provide the backdrop and anchor the inaugural session. The address of the dignitaries shall then cover actions already taken by their organisation on previous recommendations, proposed course of action as also guidance about learning's from the past and agenda for the future which should guide the proceedings. Currently in the absence of knowledge about previous recommendations, the inaugural proceedings tend to be conducted in a vacuum. Past

needs to provide backdrop for the future. If the list of recommendations pending with the departments under control of the dignitaries attending the inaugural session is sent in advance to them they would review and initiate action as otherwise it would reflect poorly on them. This would also pre-empt decision makers making vague promises for the future. Presumably this would require the organisers to enclose list of previous recommendations as first item in the agenda notes.

In fact, even dignitaries shall welcome this approach as it shall help them to address the pending issues and review the implementation of previous recommendations. To focus the session as recommended it may be renamed as “Recommendation Review Session-Looking at the Past” or “Action Taken Review Session-Looking at the Past” or any suitable name as the term inaugural session somehow gives impression of a session meant to inaugurate and make some general comments..

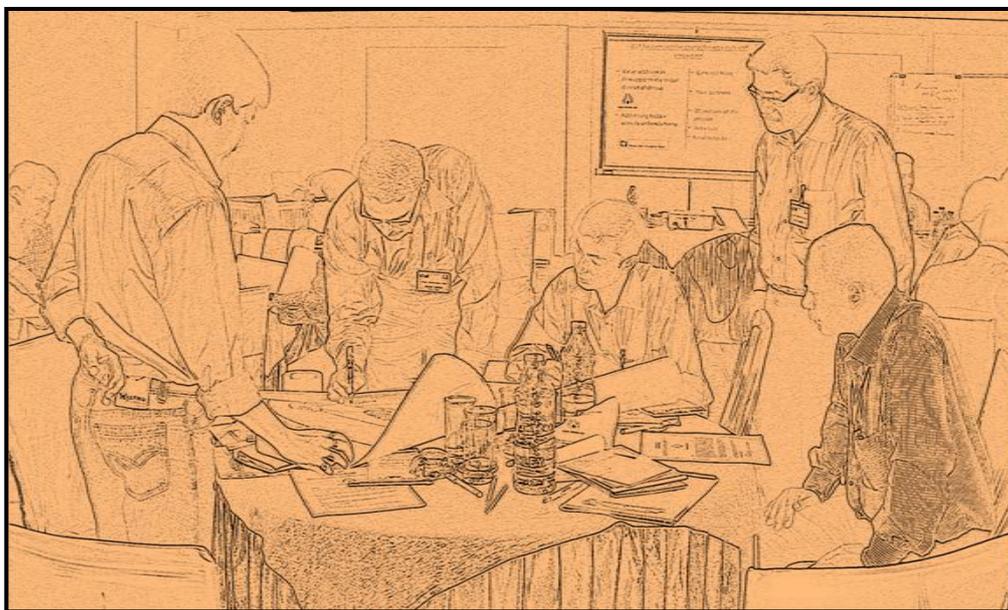
Plenary session: This session should be devoted to finalising the Agenda for Future by modifying the Directory of Recommendations based on the discussions in this event and may be suitably renamed instead of Plenary Session. Quite often when the recommendations are made the decision makers are not available and an opportunity is lost as the workshop recommendations shall compete for space with a host of other documents. Plenary session is the ideal place for the policy makers to listen to the recommendations and contribute so that the recommendations reflect their concerns and acceptance. The recommendations should be finalised in the plenary session only.

To ensure that the decision makers come prepared for the plenary session summary of recommendations of each session should be communicated to concerned policy makers after each session. Efforts should be made to make sure that the departments or agencies that are expected to implement the recommendations participate in this session. Sufficient resources should be ensured to make sure that they participate and benefit from these events.

In other words, while the inaugural session looks in to the past to know what had happened and what action has been taken on past agendas, the plenary session sets agenda for the future. The sessions in between the two sessions or the working sessions facilitate leanings from the past to set agenda for the future and need to be structured accordingly giving enough time for the speakers to present their views and for the participants to interact. As mentioned earlier if the power points slides are made available to the participants in advance they could come prepared and the time of presentation could be saved and the sessions could be devoted for interaction and finalising recommendation after discussions and building consensus. Organisers should also accept responsibility for follow up of these recommendations and there should be a system to bring the recommendations to the notice of decision makers.

Directory of Recommendations: Having an up-to-date list of previous recommendations is a prerequisite for recommendations made in this blog. A theme wise portal/directory of recommendations may be prepared, incorporating recommendations made by various workshops and seminars and also based on recommendations from commissions, committees and expert groups. Unique identity may be given to each recommendation. The directory should also indicate agency which should take action and the status of action taken. Concerned agencies may be requested to indicate reasons for not accepting the recommendations. Seminars should focus on improving previous recommendations through addition/deletion/modification and review action taken on previous recommendations and deliberate on improving implementation of recommendations. Meetings shouldn't be about repeating the same recommendations that are already made.

Workshop Resources: These should be allocated separately for administrative/ logistical and academic purposes. Academic resources may be provided for both preparatory works as also for follow up of the workshop recommendations including follow up with concerned authorities. Non academic staff may be trained for logistical work of the seminars or a retired academic may be hired for this purpose.



Good meetings aren't accidents. They are the results of good planning, good facilitators and also how the meeting rooms are set up.

Credit: Workshops/seminars should be treated as an action research project and the staff may be given adequate credit. Currently, I believe credit is given for only papers published in a seminar. It should be considered an honour to conduct a premier workshop. Credit may also be given, depending upon the quality of paper for contribution to the anchor papers on the 'Extensionpedia' without linking with seminar presentations. This may reduce pressure for preparing seminars for presentation in seminars. It is hoped that treating seminars as action research project should allow them to spend more time on these activities thus, improving the quality and value of these professional meetings.

Rating the workshops/seminars: Regular evaluations on the quality of workshops and seminars may be conducted and each workshop/seminar may be rated by professional groups on set indicators. Rating should determine funding for subsequent events by the organisers.

Funding: Clearly funding by various national agencies need to be enhanced to ensure quality. Funding may be linked to the rating of earlier workshops/seminars and also on the condition that the organisers adhere to the good principles of organising events (as discussed here). In addition funding should be made available from other sources who benefit including educational and research organisations and even commercial circles.

A national seminar on how to organise seminars? This suggestion is made in full seriousness. It should result in detailed guidelines and a manual. There should be a review of how workshops and seminars are organised in other discipline and premium institutions in India and abroad. Perhaps MANAGE or NAARM or similar organisations may take up a project on this. Most funding agencies may be invited for their inputs so that the funding agencies may insist upon adoption of these

guidelines to ensure value for these investments. This seminar could be the ideal seminar which Dr Mahesh Chander is dreaming about.

Conclusions

Many of us have been informally discussing about the need for improving the quality of professional meetings and perhaps this is something on which everyone agrees. My intention (and also others who contributed their concerns) is not to belittle the hard work that goes into organising such events. Quite often the prevailing conventions, habits and practices about seminars and workshops and resource constraints limit the choice of organisers and constrain them from thinking out of the box.

We must also admit that all professional events such as seminars, workshops and conferences contribute substantially through interactions and networking among professionals, whose value shouldn't be underestimated. Having said that, these gatherings do not deliver for the academic bandwidth available as sufficient attention is not often given to improving the quality of deliberations in these events. I hope, adoption of these suggestions made in this blog would help us reinvent the way we organise professional meetings. While this blog has mostly dwelt on organising professional events, other issues briefly touched namely extension research and quality of faculty also needs urgent attention.

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