Moving an Academic Conference to Online Format: Experience Report
(Draft v.03)

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Summary

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, in early March 2020 we had to decide whether to cancel or delay a conference that was planned for mid April 2020. We decided to move the conference online, and despite technical challenges on day 2 of the conference, we believe it went very well. In this brief experience report, we offer some guidelines that worked very well for us and can be considered as best practices.

Overview

The 12th edition of the Annual Undergraduate Research Conference on Applied Computing (URC2020) was scheduled to be held on April 15 – 16 at Zayed University in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE). With the COVID-19 outbreak, the UAE Ministry of Education was among the first to respond by canceling classes and moving the learning experience online. This happened by the end of February, and we initially thought we are still 6 weeks away from the conference and by then things would be back to normal. But on March 4, we were told we should either cancel the conference or delay it until the Fall semester! We have already reviewed all submissions and accepted 168 undergraduate research projects representing over 550 undergraduate students and their faculty advisors, and delaying the conference was not a good option because the students would have graduated and may not be able to attend and present their projects. We have also organized a special track with full papers, and 10 papers were accepted.

While we have attended Webinars and other virtual events, we have not previously run a conference online, but we thought the technology is there to support this, so we pitched the idea to Dr. Hany El Kady (Dean of the College of Technological Innovation at Zayed University) and his response was: tell me what you need and I will support you.

We explored various video conferencing services including Google meet, Microsoft Teams, Cisco Webex, Zoom, GoToMeeting, Slack…and we were leaning towards Zoom. At the end, it turned out that Zayed University has a subscription for Cisco Webex, so in a sense the decision for the video conferencing service was made for us and Webex Events was the platform of choice. The IT service department at Zayed University stepped up to the challenge and met with us several times along with representatives from Cisco, using Webex of course.

Guidelines

We have learned a lot along the way, so we would like to share our experience, and some of the following can be considered best practices because they worked very well for us.

- **Notify participants**. We notified all authors (primarily undergraduate students and their faculty advisors) of accepted projects that we will be moving the conference online. Participants were supportive and we thank them for their commitment to present their research projects. We have over 300 paid participants.

- **Reduce registration fees**. This is not a money-making conference and our objective is to cover the expenses. The regular registration fee has always been 150 UAE Dirhams, which is less than $40 per participant. Our main expense used to be catering, but with the move to online format, we no longer need to provide food and drinks…or pay for rental of conference facilities, printing of conference program, trophies for keynote speakers and best presentations. So, we have decided to cut the registration fee in half (75 UAE Dirhams per participants) which is around $20, and our main expense was the design of the eBook of Abstracts and conference program, and Amazon Gift Cards for best presentation awards.

- **Choose a video conferencing facility**. That are many options (Google meet, Cisco Webex, Zoom, GotoMeeting, see the following link for a full list: https://www.techradar.com/best/best-video-conferencing-software).

- **Have a dedicated person or two for IT and technical support**. Our IT team worked tirelessly to support us, the session chairs, and the presenters.

- **Technical training for conference and program chairs**. Once a platform has been chosen, it is important to familiarize yourselves with the platform and its capabilities and have a couple of test runs.

- **Generate links for all sessions in advance and include them in the program**. We have scheduled multiple concurrent sessions (each has a moderator as a session chair) on both days of the conference, and keep in mind the capacity for opening/closing sessions and other sessions. See an example here on how we have included the Webex links in the conference program: http://urc.ac/URC2020-OnlineProgram.pdf

    As the links are in the public, to avoid people raiding your sessions, make sure you have passwords, which can be shared with attendees by email.

- **Include breaks between sessions in the program**. In addition to breaks between sessions, we also added a 10-minute grace period to each session to facilitate switching between presentations and in case of technical issues.

- **Plan for opening and closing**. We developed a plan on who will open the conference, introduce keynote speakers, close the conference, etc. All opening and closing presentations were live, but we included a 5-minute recorded video message from the Dean and VP of Research.

- **Keep plenary sessions**. We had a keynote speaker on day 1 of the conference followed by a panel discussion. They continued their commitment with the move to online. At the end of day 2 we had a closing session and announcement of best presentations. We had over 300 participants in each of these sessions, and between 50 – 120 in regular presentation sessions.

- **Train the session chairs on using the platform**. It is crucial that the session chairs are trained to use the platform effectively to moderate the session, mute & unmute participants, and grant/revoke screensharing permissions to presenters when it is their turn to present, and utilize the chat area for Q&A.

- **Run test sessions for presenters and provide links to platform's textual and video tutorials**. We have scheduled a couple of sessions for presenters to join and test their computers and the sharing of their slides. We emailed the links to the presenters and more than 60% of the presenters joined and tested their devices.

- **Time-zones**. We adopted the Dubai time-zone for the conference as almost all of the participants were either within that time-zone or two hours max. When the conference started at 10:00am Dubai time, it was 2:00am in Toronto for the first author. For international conferences, you would have participants in different time zones, but it is important to adopt a single time-zone for the conference.

- **Live vs recorded presentations**. Like many universities worldwide, we have just moved to emergency remote teaching online and noticed the interactive nature of synchronous delivery, so we have decided to go with live presentations (5 minutes per research project) and the fact that almost all presenters were in the same time-zone helped. Each presentation was evaluated by two faculty members for best presentation awards. Recorded presentations would work too depending on other factors as outlined below.

- **Registration data on joining**. When people join the sessions, ask for some registration information (e.g. name, affiliation) so you can get some useful analytics.

- **Create a separate virtual room and a Whatsapp group for conference organizers**. We have a virtual room created so we can meet between sessions and catch up on issues, and a Whatsapp group for organizers, sessions chairs and IT team.

- **Schedule an extra session at the end of each day for emergencies**. We have done this (did not include it on the program through) to accommodate the presenters who could not present as scheduled due to technical issues on their end and missed their time slot.

- **Engage participants using interactive polling tools**. We have made minimal use of Slido for general Q&A and during the closing session – we could have made more use of

this or similar tools for engagement and interactivity. Some video conference services may have built-in polling tools.

- **Record the presentations**. The nice thing about having an online conference is the ability to so easily record presentations in the cloud and made them available after the conference.

- **Ditch the paper certificate**. Many conferences we have attended provide a certificate of attendance. We have made the decision to switch to eCertificates a few years ago and it is working so well. Certificates are emailed to all participants at the end of the conference. This year, we issued a digital credentials (badge) through Credly as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Conference digital credential (badge).

- **Expect the unexpected**. The network bandwidth on day 1 was excellent, but we had a couple of technical issues on day 2 that resulted in delay in running some sessions.

Following the conference, we conducted a quick survey to get a feel for what people thought about the conference. Figure 2 shows the distribution of participants, and Figure 3 shows their recommendations on the online format. The Graduate option (Figure 2) was entered under 'Other' and we believe it means graduate students or someone who already graduated.
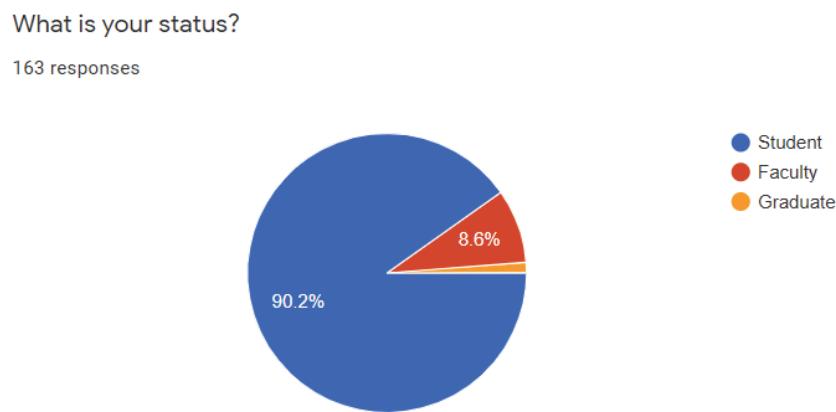

Figure 2: Who are the participants.

Would you recommend the online conference format to your friends?

163 responses
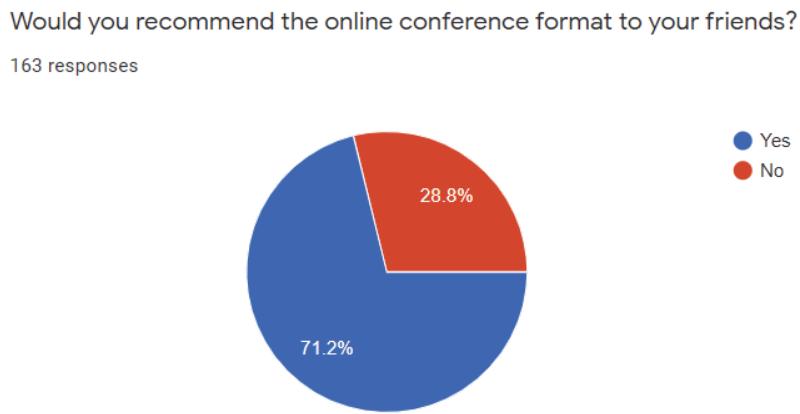
Figure 3: Would you recommend the online conference format.

Conclusion

We believe we have done the right thing by moving the conference online, and overall the conference was successful. We hope the above guidelines / best practices are useful, and wish you luck with your conference.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the students and their faculty advisors for their commitment to present their research projects, the rest of the organizing committee, the session chairs for moderating the presentations, and all participants for making URC2020 a successful virtual conference. We would also like to thank our institutions for their support, with special thanks to the IT team at Zayed University who worked tirelessly to support the conference.