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# Introduction

*Whether to accelerate scientific research, raise funding, or drive social change, the stories and individuals featured have been captured to inspire others to take the long view and think about how they can use their events to help create a lasting impact in their own field of endeavour.*

(Lyn Lewis-Smith, CEO Business Events Sydney)

This book lays a challenge at the feet of the global business events industry to consider a reassessment of the way it thinks, the way it operates, the way it sees itself and the way it values and measures its achievements. It also asks governments and policy-makers to consider what broader legacies could be leveraged from business events to enrich the lives of those they govern. Finally, it seeks to inspire the students and new graduates who will one day be steering the industry. By expanding their understanding and vision of what's possible for business events today, there will be no limit to what can be achieved in the future.

Whilst many have contributed to the body of knowledge that has propelled this text forward, it is the first comprehensive and evidence-based attempt to argue that planning for, measuring and evaluating business events in terms of tourism expenditure alone is a limited perspective grounded in outdated thinking.

The book proposes that, by reconceptualising business events as important catalysts for change, the industry could position itself as one of the most important elements of social and economic development, driving knowledge generation and sharing, creating countless successful research partnerships, facilitating beneficial trade and political relations, recognising, stimulating and energising scholarly output, and encouraging development of emerging industry sectors and second-tier cities and economies.

All that is needed is a new perspective.

## A time to reflect

In 2020–2021 the business events industry, like many others, was challenged by the lockdowns, travel bans and social distancing restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Mass gatherings of all kinds were cancelled, postponed or disrupted in destinations around the world and event industry professionals found themselves scrambling to implement new technologies capable of delivering virtual adaptations of the in-person meetings and conferences they had planned. Given the circumstances and the speed with which they had to pivot, what was achieved was remarkable, and at least some degree of connectivity was achieved. However, whilst most agree that virtual events are better than nothing, there is also broad consensus that the energy, inspiration and atmosphere generated by like-minded people gathering together physically at meetings and conferences was missed (Edwards *et al.*, 2020).

As vaccines and greater immunity slow the spread of the virus, face-to-face business events will almost certainly resume because, as humans and as professionals, we are drawn to gather with our peers. The small talk with strangers that goes on as delegates wait in the registration queue will again lead to friendships, networks and partnerships. The casual conversations over lunch will again spark inspirational ideas and solutions to problems. And the serendipitous introductions made during pre-dinner drinks will once again lead to funding opportunities that talented researchers had never dreamed possible.

The networking and interaction that occurs at in-person business events is very hard to achieve online. However, virtual events do have their merits. They are generally more accessible in terms of mobility, finance and time. They don't involve jet lag for long-haul passengers and they offer easier access for those not able or willing to travel. The carbon footprint of virtual attendance is better for the planet, registration fees are lower and there is no need to pay for accommodation. Essentially, *more* people may be able to attend *more* events *more* often if they are offered virtually. Because of this, the world will emerge from the pandemic period with a 'new normal' for business events with many more virtual and hybrid options being available to delegates than in the past.

However, it may well be that the new 'normal' for such events will mean fewer hotel rooms and cups of coffee are consumed by delegates. This could prove challenging for an industry which has etched out its worth and value using such measures.

So, as the events industry takes stock of what it has learned in recent times and reconfigures itself to account for this new normal, it may also be timely to consider whether there is need for an entirely different approach to the way business events are conceptualised, leveraged, planned, delivered, studied and evaluated in the future.

The impetus for this book began over a decade ago, when the authors began investigating whether conferences and business events created benefits

and legacies beyond those related to tourism (Foley *et al.*, 2010; Foley *et al.*, 2013). Early studies suggested they did, and research tools were developed to identify just what those benefits were, how frequently they occurred and what impacts they generated (Edwards *et al.*, 2011; Foley *et al.*, 2014; Edwards *et al.*, 2016; Edwards *et al.*, 2017). The product of their research, along with the works of others (for example, Jago & Deery, 2012; Hansen *et al.*, 2020), is prompting a shift in attitudes, as industry leaders recognise that defining the success of a business event in terms of simply a tourism contribution limits its potential value. As competition for public funding, potential delegates' time and other resources increases, the higher the value proposition a business event can demonstrate, the more likely it will be sustainable and successful over the long term.

It also follows that, by identifying, planning for, and achieving the broadest possible range of social, economic, environmental, political and knowledge-based benefits from business events, the more sustainable, resilient and successful the industry itself will become.

## The tourism/events partnership

For decades, business event professionals and governments have operated under the narrow assumption that event legacies are best measured by their tourism contribution (Dwyer *et al.*, 2016; Foley *et al.*, 2013). But how did the value and worth of business events become so inextricably tied to tourism generation and expenditure? In very simple terms, it was a matter of 'right place; right time'.

Tourism (travelling) and events (gatherings which connect people and communities) have always been important aspects of human behaviour. However, it wasn't until the latter decades of the 20th century, with growth in both the public provision and commercialisation of leisure, that a small number of Western universities began offering relevant diplomas and subsequently degrees. These were initially leisure studies degrees, which covered multiple areas (recreation, sport, tourism, hospitality and events). This meant graduates had knowledge and professional skills in each of these areas, and understood the linkages and relationships between them. Tourism and then events soon emerged as scholarly fields in their own right at a time when both industries were becoming important to destination economies.

However, there were those who challenged the worth, legitimacy and long-term career potential that would come from these new industries. They questioned why one needed a degree to be able to manage tourism and events and whether the contributions graduates could make to society warranted the tertiary education resources being invested in them. Given these challenges, the developing industries recognised the importance of being able to justify their existence. Those in the field knew there were countless social and cultural benefits that involvement in event and tourism activities could bring, but what was needed in the neo-liberal managerial environment that characterised the era was measurable, tangible data that could be used to defend the legitimacy of what they did.