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Conferences as Catalysts for Thriving Economies

Knowledge creation is increasingly dependent on collaboration, which relies on the camaraderie, trust and relationships formed through face-to-face contact. Business events provide the platforms for this physical in-person interaction and the foundation for the networks that then drive collaboration and innovation.

(Lyn Lewis-Smith, CEO Business Events Sydney)

This chapter explores the changing perceptions of the value of business events. As discussed in Chapter 1, formal industries and tertiary education courses in tourism and event management emerged in the latter decades of the 20th century. During that period, Western economies were being influenced by economic rationalism, prompting some to question the contributions such industries could make to the economic viability of society, expansion of business and job creation. One important argument in support of the development of these industries, therefore, was the economic stimulus they could provide for local economies by way of tourism expenditure. A symbiotic relationship developed between the events and tourism industries, with events being seen as an effective way of generating additional tourism activity, and tourism expenditure being used to justify and evaluate the successfulness of an event. This was particularly so in terms of business events, given that visitors to business events have higher daily expenditures compared to those of all other tourists (Foley *et al.*, 2014a; Foley *et al.*, 2014b), and as a result, the business event delegate came to be seen as the most desirable visitor in the world (Business Events Council of Australia, 2010).

But can business events provide value beyond their contribution to tourism expenditure?

The practice of rationalising, bidding for, investing in and evaluating the successfulness of business events based on the tourism spend they generated was both practical and understandable at a time when the events industry was etching out its place within neo-liberalist economies. However, with the events

industry now well established, there were opportunities to look beyond the value provided as a result of direct tourism-related expenditure and to unlock the potential of business events to generate more significant and lasting economic and non-economic values.

New understandings of the value of business events beyond the tourism contribution began to emerge in the early decades of the 21st century. Business event scholars argued that business events should not be measured by direct financial contribution alone (Dwyer et al., 2000; Foley et al. 2014c; Edwards et al., 2016; Edwards et al., 2017), that there was a lack of recognition of the wider benefits of events (Carlsen et al., 2001; Wood, 2009; Foley et al., 2010), and that these non-tourism benefits had yet to be fully examined (Foley et al., 2013). Many research, policy and business environments needed unique opportunities to showcase, construct and brainstorm new strategies, ideas and technologies in order to thrive, and things like live presentations and networking opportunities at conferences could create special impetus for developing new professional relationships and research collaborations that would survive well past the closing ceremony.

A number of industry reports (Business Events Industry Strategy Group, 2008; Foley et al., 2010; Jago & Deery, 2010; Teulan, 2010; Edwards et al., 2016) offered evidence-based examples of the broader economic benefits that business events could bring; however, very little peer-reviewed academic literature had examined indirect economic legacies and non-economic legacies. There was clearly a need to evaluate business events in more sophisticated ways that moved beyond the traditional economic impact measures (Dwyer et al., 2015). This case study (adapted from du Cross, Foley, Edwards & Hergesell, 2017) offers one exemplar in its examination of the value beyond the tourism contribution of a set of 12 international conferences held in Sydney, Australia.

Case study: The value of conferences beyond tourism benefits

Business event(s)	12 international conferences of various sizes and sectors in 2014 and 2015
Location(s)	Sydney, Australia
Primary event legacy	Business events facilitate interactions and collaborations that underpin innovation, economic development and societal change
Additional legacies (beyond tourism)	Knowledge expansion, industry innovation, networks, collaborations, social capital, community development, international relations, showcasing destination, attracting global talent
Summary quote	“Findings from this study demonstrate ... it is essential for governments to transition from valuing business events for their expenditure outputs to recognising them as transformative social network spaces.”
Lessons learned	Outcomes need to be leveraged/planned in advance
Future research	Ways of documenting/measuring long-term impacts on idea generation, research collaborations, delegate careers, knowledge creation and industry development

This case study was adapted from: du Cros, H., Foley, C., Edwards, D. and Hergesell, A. (2017)

Introduction

This case study examines 12 international business events held in Sydney in 2014 and 2015. The events chosen were diverse in terms of both industry sector and size in order to ensure wide applicability of findings. Four events were from the cultural sector, three were medical, three were technical industry events, and there were two environmental congresses (see Table 2.1). Delegate numbers ranged from as few as 60 to as many as 6000.

Primary and secondary data sources (including questionnaires and personal interviews) were used to establish the demographic profiles of respondents and to garner their perspectives on whether certain legacies (beyond tourism benefits) had been generated as a result of the events.

The overall aims of the study were to determine whether such events (particularly international conferences) have the potential to act as catalysts for economies and to understand what can be done to maximise the extent to which business events are able to energise or reboot the professions and industry environments they support.

The case study was prepared by researchers from the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) Business School, who were commissioned by Business Events Sydney (BESydney) to investigate potential legacy outcomes arising from business events.

Table 2.1: Business events surveyed, dates held and industry sector

Conference	Held	Number of Attendees	Industry Sector
World Harp Congress (WHC)	Jul 2014	604	Cultural
World Congress on Mild Approaches in Assisted Reproduction (ISMAAR)	Sep 2014	168	Medical
Polarised Neutrons in Condense Matter Investigations (PNCMI)	Sep 2014	60	Technology
4th International Congress of International Society for Cultural and Activity Research (ISCAR)	Oct 2014	342	Cultural
World Green Infrastructure Congress (WGIC)	Oct 2014	371	Environment
Congress of the International Society for Burn Injuries (ISBI)	Oct 2014	903	Medical
International Conference on Walking and Liveable Communities (Walk21)	Oct 2014	502	Cultural
Communicating the Museum (CTM)	Nov 2014	265	Cultural
IUCN World Parks Congress (IUCN)	Nov 2014	6081	Environment
5th INS/ASSBI Pacific Rim Conference (PRC)	Jul 2015	672	Medical
IEEE Multi-Conference on Systems and Control (MSC)	Sep 2015	317	Technology
World Hydrogen Technologies Convention (WHTC)	Oct 2015	320	Technology