

7

Academic Scholars and Conferences

Academic events are powerful platforms that can be instrumental for the academic sector in fulfilling its role in society. The events allow for engagement with other sectors in society – these are platforms for dissemination of research; they are platforms for engaging stakeholders such as patient groups, media and industry; and they are key arenas for forming the networks and ideas that will shape the research of tomorrow.

Thomas Trøst Hansen, Ph.D., Science Attaché & Consul, Innovation Centre Denmark, Shanghai Royal Danish Consulate General

Ever since higher education became formalised, academic scholars have come together physically to share information, learn from each other and showcase their achievements. What most likely began in the Middle Ages as informal gatherings of like-minded thinkers had evolved into semi-structured symposiums (small conferences) by the 15th century, organised by scientific societies. These early conferences provided platforms for members to speak freely about subjects of mutual interest, exchange ideas and stimulate thought (Hankins, 2009; Sopta, 2013; Guerado, 2017; Rogers, 2019). For example, the great scholar Galileo was able to freely share his scientific discoveries with peers at the Italian Accademia dei Lincei (formed in 1603) despite his ideas being deemed extremely controversial and condemned by the church (Egger & Carpi, 2009). The knowledge and ideas generated and exchanged at scientific society symposia in the early modern period (15th to the 18th century) have been credited with making significant contributions to the development of scientific thought (Rogers, 2019).

Over time, these symposiums became more formalised, evolving into the larger conferences linked to the professional associations that we know today, where attendees have opportunities to network, form friendships and further their careers (Foley *et al.*, 2014). When viewed from this historical perspective, it becomes clear that academic research conferences are the foundational pillar upon which today's meetings and events industry has been built.

This long history, along with the unique traditions, conditions and expectations associated with academic conferences, presents a challenge for today's business event professional, who is eager to engage with academics in the bidding and hosting process and use their skills to increase the number, size and successfulness of such events, yet who has scant information or insight into the motivations, or cultural norms and practices of the world of academia. Why would a time-poor professor want to spend dozens of unpaid hours organising a conference? And what happens if the event is a flop? What's the point of a young researcher going along to a conference if no-one is interested in talking to them? Why don't more academics want to host conferences? How is a mid-career academic supposed to gain the skills or access the resources needed to organise their first major event? How does it feel when a PhD student spends months preparing a presentation and no-one turns up to hear it? And what are the real benefits of conferences for the universities and institutions that predominantly fund them?

Whilst academic conferences have been held for centuries, the conference industry which has been built around them is relatively young, only becoming professionalised in the latter part of the 20th century (Rogers, 2013). In the meantime, the global business events industry has grown exponentially, with air transport developments allowing mass travel in the second half of the 20th century, in turn prompting the formation of international communities and friendships among scholars who meet, often annually, to share findings and common interests (Foley *et al.*, 2014).

In the 21st century, technological advances in the area of communications and a health pandemic accelerated the growth of virtual participation in academic conferences. As issues such as the carbon footprint generated by large academic conferences, the increased capacity of new technologies to connect people who are geographically distanced, university funding cuts, and the travel restrictions experienced as a result of the recent health crisis arise (along with the potential for similar crises in the future), questions and challenges are emerging around the long-term viability of the traditional conference: in particular, do the potential benefits and outcomes of the current model warrant the costs and inputs required? It is crucial, therefore, to the future of academia, the knowledge economy and the events industry that fuller understanding and recognition of the value of academic conferences is attained, and that practical tools and systems are developed to ensure legacy outcomes are maximised.

This chapter focuses on some of the benefits, barriers and perceived outcomes of conferences for academics and universities. It specifically considers:

- The potential benefits of conference attendance for academics;
- The potential benefits of hosting conferences for academics;
- The potential benefits to universities as a result of their academics and PhDs attending or hosting conferences;

- The real and perceived barriers that discourage academics from hosting conferences;
- The relevance of these barriers and benefits to event professionals and suggestions for industry application.

The chapter includes a case study adapted from Hansen (2018), providing insights into the experiences of a number of academics who had each hosted (or attempted to host) an academic conference. This research makes an important contribution to our understanding of the benefits and barriers encountered by academics who undertake such a project and offers suggestions for how such benefits might be maximised and barriers overcome.

Following the case study is a more general discussion of the benefits for academics of attending conferences in the context of the credibility cycle (Hansen *et al.*, 2020). There is also discussion of how academics' involvement with conferences can benefit the broader community and examples of some significant outcomes which have already been achieved. Whether or not an academic conference is being organised by an individual academic, a professional association or event professionals, the majority of delegates, presenters and keynote speakers will be academics. As key stakeholders, it is vital that their needs and perspectives are well understood and considered in the delivery of the event.

Case study: Benefits and challenges of hosting conferences for academics and universities

Business event(s)	Six international research conferences and two failed attempts to host a conference in four European countries
Location(s) and time of events	Edinburgh (Scotland), Amsterdam (Netherlands), Gothenburg (Sweden), Copenhagen, Aalborg & Odense (Denmark), held between 2012 & 2016.
Type of event(s)	Academic conferences from various fields, including engineering, health, economics and biology
Primary audience	Various – with delegate numbers of between 458 and 20,522
Primary event legacy (for host)	Increased visibility and networking capacity for academics and researchers organising international conferences
Additional legacies (beyond tourism)	<i>For host institutions (universities):</i> improved global reputation, attraction of talent, increased visibility, external funding <i>For wider and local research environments:</i> increased access to top talent, increased visibility for researchers and their work, greater access to recent research for project development and teaching
Barriers (for host)	Lack of time and resources
Summary quote	"The conference itself is only part of a larger process from the motivation to host, to planning and execution to the follow-up phase. All four phases can spur benefits (for) the host institution, the research environments and for individual researchers."

This case study was adapted from: Hansen, T. (2018)