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Title The Value, Scope and Cost of Conferences: looking beyond the Events industry

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The Value, Scope and Cost of Conferences: looking beyond the Events industry

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Abstract

Despite massive global engagement, conferences receive a mixed reception among academic, scientific and professional (ASP) communities. The Events industry describes a multi-billion dollar activity, but although conferences seem to generate personal value, their external value is seldom measurable. Using the SHRE 2015 and 2016 conferences as a case study, this presentation offers a methodology to determine the main financial costs of conferences. Using accessible delegate data and nationally determinable costs, it is possible to examine the conference cost factors of delegate travel, registration fee, accommodation and workplace support. These costs may be directly associated with a single event/series, and adapted to reflect national contexts. When the results of this case study are generalised to a global perspective, they offer values in-line with published figures and re-affirm a multi-billion dollar activity. Using this approach allows an evidence-based assessment to be made of the monetary and environmental cost of conference events.

Research Domain: Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Conferences are an established activity across many academic, scientific and professional (ASP) disciplines, and networking processes have become more similar across fields (Mägi & Beerkens 2016) In the 19th century, universities increasingly provided events for disseminating information within academic circles, and during the 20th century, trade and industry began to invest heavily in meetings, hosting events aimed to develop staff and sales (Rogers 2008, Shone 2009). At both trade and academic meetings, established and trainee delegates get together to share information, interact and discuss matters of professional interest (e.g. Rowe 2017a). As such, conferences have become an integral part of Higher Education (HE) practice in terms of knowledge exchange, professional formation and the continued professional education activities of the ASP sector. However, beyond personal value, their external value is unclear and seldom measurable. This paper develops a methodology for calculating the main costs of conferences, to help inform a cost-benefit valuation of conference events.

The Conferences and Events Industry

The Conference and Events Industry literature is mainly economically oriented and has not thoroughly investigated the needs, motivations or profiles of ASP users. Indeed, the ASP sector is seldom differentiated as a specific user group, and its various meetings fall within broader

groupings e.g. *conventions, congresses and membership organizations* (PWC 2014), *professional associations and institutions, societies, and educational and academic groups* (UKCAMS 2016), *non-corporate meetings* (ECM 2012), or simply *meetings and conventions* (BECA 2015). This ambiguity makes it difficult to estimate the scope of ASP conferences. Also, the Events Industry errs towards value-based reporting, citing incredible expenditures (e.g. the US Events industry reports annual direct spending over \$US 280 billion (PWC 2014), the UK £19.2 billion (UKCAMS 2016), and Australia \$A 28 billion (BECA 2015)). These figures even exceed those generated by the automotive, film, or media communications industries (Kovaleski 2011), and whilst it is easy to envisage the expenditure of the ASP sector as being substantial, no academic research has been undertaken to explore this issue.

The ASP conference sector

Globally, there are approximately 22,123 registered HEIs (CSIC 2015), 8.4 million researchers (Ware & Mabe 2015), and some 17,500 scientific associations and learned societies (Saur 2006). If each of the identified HEIs and associations/societies held one conference each year, this would result in 39,623 meetings per year. If these were of published Events industry size (averaging 223 delegates: PWC 2014) and only 50% of attendees presented a paper, this would result in 4.5 million presentations per year, surpassing the main 'academic currency' of the journal article (2.5 million articles p.a.: Ware & Mabe 2015, 6) by 16–43%.

We have no data beyond these estimates, and this is mainly due to the on-going 'grey literature' nature of conference publications (Rowe 2017b). A forthcoming study has investigated the needs and motivations of conference attendees, and shows that conferences are attributed with differing levels of personal value (Rowe 2017c). However, more quantitative measures are needed in order to establish generalizable measures of cost and return. This is especially important, given that travel to meetings has been highlighted in recent budgetary scrutiny (Cohen 2013), and the scale and function of meetings is now being linked to performance and worth (Rowe 2017b; Cohen 2013). In determining value, it is necessary to measure investment against return. To address the first part of this equation, it is possible to examine commonly accessible data relating to individual conference delegates, and construct a replicable framework to examine the cost implications of individual events.

Case Study: SRHE 2015-16

Using the SRHE 2015 and 2016 conferences as an analytical case study, the common conference cost factors of travel, registration fee, accommodation and workplace/institutional support were explored. Anonymised delegate data was obtained from the conference organisers, and used to discern the travel requirements of domestic and international attendees. This was analysed in relation to conference fees (actual and a comparative random national sample from published events (n=100)), road travel reimbursement (based on published reimbursement rates from 20 UK universities) and published air mile cost estimations (Cameron 2017), and accommodation costs (actual and comparative published national rates (Hutchinson 2016)). An average wage was determined based on published national rates for a cross-section of student and academic pay scales, and used to estimate delegates' external support costs for attending or preparing for the event (1 working week). Of course, all of these items are subject to individual variations, but given the lack of consistent and generalizable data, these parameters are useful for providing a grounded estimate.

Findings

According to this calculation, over the 2 years, the average SRHE event hosted 294 national delegates and 134 international delegates. Delegates incurred average costs of £1,568 per

national delegate, and £2,269 per international delegate. National delegates travelled an average of 321 miles to attend the event, at an average cost of £129 per event. International delegates travelled an average of 7,218 flight miles, with an average total cost of £830. Attending this conference raised the individual carbon footprint of delegates by more than 7 times the normal European daily level of production. Individually delegates spent an average of £213 on accommodation and £212 on conference fees. If delegates were provided with 1 week's financial support (£895 based on cross-sector UK pay scales), this would average £373,663 per event. Overall, an SRHE event entailed £765,038 in delegate expenditure at an average cost of £1,832 per delegate.

Global estimates

If the findings of this case study are generalised, the global ASP conference expenditure can be estimated at approximately £11.5 billion, and this is similar to figures offered elsewhere (Lee & Fenich 2016; Mair 2010). When adjustments were made for different calculations of conference numbers and presentation rates, the results fell within a 10% mean average deviation of this sum. This methodology provides firm and replicable measures of estimated individual conference costs. By individually establishing the national scope of their ASP communities, countries can examine conferences from more concrete national perspectives, and form their own opinions on their value and cost implications. When combined, such studies may help to build a more informed picture of global conference expenditure.

This paper has offered a methodology for calculating the main costs of conferences. The ASP sector incurs a multi-billion conference expenditure every year, even exceeding the entire GDP of some of the lowest ranked countries in the world (IMF 2016; World Bank 2015; United Nations 2016). So in terms of sustainability, efficacy and practicality, there is an urgent need to ensure that ASP conference activities deliver value commensurate with their levels of investment. Although applying this methodology is likely to reveal differences in national contexts, it will provide reliable quantitative data to inform a cost-benefit valuation of conference events, and help elevate the value discussion beyond a personal level.

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