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Dallas O'Dell   August 4th, 2023

We need to talk about conferences

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*As conference season rolls to an end, **Dallas O'Dell** reflects on how we can reduce the costs associated with attending academic conferences to adopt a people- and planet-friendly approach.*

For today's PhD students, conferences are still upheld as vital opportunities to share their research, network for potential job prospects, collaborate, and build their curriculum vitae (CV). In reality, these excursions impose a variety of costs on individuals who feel they will be left behind if they do not attend. Given the precarious financial position of PhDs and early-career academics, who often endure deep financial and emotional insecurity, the academic community should be concerned about the imposition of additional, arguably superfluous costs on this group. In this post, I summarise the various costs associated with academic conferences, collate potential solutions to reduce those costs, and more importantly, express the need for both cultural and institutional changes to usher in new forms of connecting that benefit people and the planet.

When the costs add up

This year marked my first foray into applying for academic conferences, admittedly a bit late as a third-year PhD student. With little thought toward the reality of acceptance or the logistics of attendance, I blindly applied to two conferences in mainland Europe, having heard that funding was available through the university. I assumed the funding would fully cover these costs, at least for PhD students who are surviving on notoriously low incomes.

To my astonishment, registration fees alone for these conferences were several hundreds of pounds each. While flights to Northern and Eastern Europe might be relatively affordable as I am based in the UK, trains emitting on average six times less GHG emissions appeared to cost roughly triple the amount that flights do, and could take around 10 times as long. I quickly realised that between financial, environmental, and/or temporal costs, there was no 'low-cost' option to attending a conference. And yet, I kept hearing how invaluable they were for future academic career success, particularly for networking purposes. To make matters worse, financial assistance for PhD students

at my university does not cover the full cost of attending the conference, requiring out-of-pocket spending to secure one's career.

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Talking the talk

I admit, pointing out issues with academic conferences is not novel, nor even a particularly recent phenomenon. In 2019, Portia Roelofs, emphasised the environmental burden associated with academic air travel, especially when white, West-based scholars take high-emission flights. Beyond climate issues, it also reinforces existing inequalities within academia. While established scholars from Europe or the US are flown to faraway lands for free, African scholars are systematically prevented from such travel, when Western governments deny their visas to attend conferences. Nihan Albayrak-Aydemir further reveals the burdens and costs associated with attending conferences for scholars who face a passport penalty. Not only does it require much more preparation time, more money to apply for visas, and higher risks of losing out on career opportunities, but it also imposes emotional costs on academics who already face more adversity and exclusion. Speaking of which, William E Donald highlights how in-person conferences uphold ableist norms. The swift return from hybrid to in-person meetings following the pandemic, he argues, showed that inclusion of disabled individuals and those with caring duties was possible, making the subsequent exclusion from such gatherings sting even more. Finally, Joe Nevins and Park Wilde of Tufts University have created a web sitedevoted to "reducing academia's carbon footprint" with a section on low-carbon conferences.

Walking the walk

While it is a complex problem, several academics have been exploring options and solutions to reduce travel costs. Roelofs suggests a) before engaging in such travel, think about who benefits from academic flying and who pays the price; b) redistribute or prioritise air travel funds for countries who have less access to academic circles; and c) support more opportunities for virtual connections. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the unforeseen proliferation of online communications and video-conferencing has allowed people from all over the world to connect without any travel. Remote or hybrid conferences can substantially cut environmentalcosts associated with such events and promote equity. Making hybrid events the default, Donald argues, can also foster greater inclusion in academic communities, but the costs for in-person and online attendance should not be equivalent, as this sort of hybrid option only reinforces systemic ableism. Albayrak-Aydemir (2020) also advocates for more virtual conference events and offers solutions to reduce other costs, including holding events in countries with less onerous visa requirements, or offering reduced registration fees for those who cannot afford the full amount. While these may not mitigate

emissions, they do reduce the burden felt most strongly by marginalised groups who may already face disadvantages in building academic careers.

> ## *Another solution at the institutional level would be to make reimbursements conditional.*

Another solution at the institutional level would be to make reimbursements conditional. Sustainable travel policies adopted by universities like University of Amsterdam, can encourage more environmentally-friendly travel or less travel altogether by disincentivising flying. UvA's policy states that staff flights for official business will not be reimbursed if the destination can be reached by train within six hours. Crucially, they urge staff to consider whether attendance can be done remotely before considering such travel.

If in-person networking opportunities are still desired, organisers should prioritise localised conference formats, which can certainly make it easier and more desirable to travel via train. One option is the Multi-Site Low-Carbon Conference Hosting (MULCH) Project, which would preserve the social benefits of in-person convening, whilst reducing the distance participants would need to travel. For example, the 15th International Conference on Music Perception and Cognition had simultaneous sites spanning four continents – in Montréal, Québec; Sydney, Australia; La Plata, Argentina; and Graz, Austria. These multi-site options offer a concrete expression of global thinking and local action that has long been part of the ethos of environmental movements.

> ## *If the costs to attend conferences outweigh the benefits, then let's not blindly continue to follow these norms of attendance.*

Need for change

It is perhaps most frustrating that the conversation around academic flying is not new, and that solutions exist, and yet change does not appear on the horizon. It is unacceptable that academia, comprising a group of people upon whom society relies to both diagnose problems and generate solutions, cannot change the way we organise something as mundane as a conference to reduce our collective environmental impact. We must prioritise solutions that come at the institutional level, such as the conditional reimbursement policies, as opposed to individualising these problems. The

precarious position of doctoral students and early-career academics, who face mounting pressure to produce research outputs, means that those who can least afford to attend conferences may feel the most obliged to go. While the UK may be in a worse geographic position than, say the Netherlands, for train travel across the Continent, institutional commitment must be more pervasive to support a cultural shift in academia to reduce air travel.

More fundamentally, we need a shift in academic norms of success, which starts by acknowledging that flying to present research at an international conference is no longer necessary. In the era of performativity, the focus on metrics and productivity means that counting conference presentations has become another metric to showcase one's achievements, despite the fact that side conversations and connections over coffee appear the most valuable takeaway. If networking is the main benefit of conferences, then we must think of lower cost formats to promote that outcome. Roelofs recommends a section on academic CVs for virtual participation, to avoid any penalty for not attending in person. Pushing further, those in hiring positions can choose to not use conference attendance as a marker of career success, and if they already do not consider it, then this should be made more transparent to early-career academics. If the costs to attend conferences outweigh the benefits, then let's not blindly continue to follow these norms of attendance. As Roelofs (2019) points out, every generation of scholars must contend with the vision of success in academia. In the midst of mass precarity and climate catastrophe, we must prioritise lowering the costs to succeed.

Note: A version of this post first appeared on 30 May, 2023 on the Contemporary Issues in Teaching and Learning Blog, part of the PGCertHE programme at the LSE.

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About the author
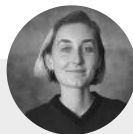
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