

Conference travel as a barrier to knowledge development

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Following his previous post on the [impact of academic conferences](#), **Donald Nicolson** considers the potential problems posed by conference travel. Are academics from the southern hemisphere and Asia disadvantaged by the disproportionate number of northern hemisphere venues? And might the realities of modern day international travel discourage some academics from attending conferences at all? Such barriers can impact on continuing professional development and the sharing of knowledge.



Having an underlying neurological condition that made long-haul flight questionable for a number of years, I confined my travel to continental Europe. Therefore I was delighted when I got the medical all-clear to travel to New Zealand to present part of my PhD at a conference. While my medical condition has not been a barrier to my attending conferences, for many academics travel is a barrier to their attending or not. There are a range of specific barriers to conference travel that are well documented, to which I would like to provisionally add a further two.

The southern hemisphere

When I attended the Cochrane Colloquium in Barcelona in 2003, each delegate received a free hardback book about Archie Cochrane, the founder of the organisation that bears his name. The book, *Archie Cochrane: Back to the Front*, recounted his involvement in the Spanish Civil War, where he was a volunteer in a field ambulance unit at the siege of Madrid. This hardback tome that adorned delegates' luggage on returning home might ironically have added to the weight of each plane and so to the carbon footprint, which in the more enlightened noughties was recognised as a cause for concern for conference travel. For example, Fiona Godlee wrote about [the dangers of conference travel on climate change](#).



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In interviews, academics from the southern hemisphere told me that they felt, because more conferences are held in Europe and the United States, that the time and distance spent travelling to conferences in the northern hemisphere was a particular barrier to them attending, as they were away from their offices for longer than their northern peers. For some it made sense for them to combine conference attendance with taking the opportunity to travel before or after, for example to combine it with visiting relatives in the UK. For others it meant staying away from the conference. It had not previously occurred to me how academics from Australasia and the southern hemisphere are disadvantaged by the travelling distance required to attend conferences, which tend to be held in the northern hemisphere, and specifically Europe.

One international conference that I attended was the Cochrane Colloquium; an annual conference first held in 1993 and most recently in 2015. Figure 1 below shows the venue of each Cochrane Colloquium, in which continent it was held and whether this was in the northern or southern hemisphere.

Year	Venue	Continent	Hemisphere
1993	Oxford, UK	Europe	Northern
1994	Hamilton, Canada	North America	Northern
1995	Oslo, Norway	Europe	Northern
1996	Adelaide, Australia	Asia	Southern
1997	Amsterdam, The Netherlands	Europe	Northern
1998	Baltimore, USA	North America	Northern
1999	Rome, Italy	Europe	Northern
2000	Cape Town, South Africa	Africa	Southern
2001	Lyon, France	Europe	Northern
2002	Stavanger, Norway	Europe	Northern
2003	Barcelona, Spain	Europe	Northern
2004	Ottawa, Canada	North America	Northern
2005	Melbourne, Australia	Asia	Southern
2006	Dublin, Ireland	Europe	Northern
2007	Sao Paulo, Brazil	South America	Southern
2008	Freiburg, Germany	Europe	Northern
2009	Singapore	Asia	Northern
2010	Keystone, Colorado, USA	North America	Northern
2011	Madrid, Spain	Europe	Northern
2012	Auckland, New Zealand	Asia	Southern
2013	Quebec, Canada	North America	Northern
2014	Hyderabad, India	Asia	Northern
2015	Vienna, Austria	Europe	Northern
2016	Seoul, South Korea	Asia	Northern

Figure 1: Trends in the venue of the Cochrane Colloquium
(Source: [Cochrane Community, Past Colloquia](#))

Of the 23 colloquia that have been held to date, more than three quarters took place in the northern hemisphere, with 11 in Europe and five in North America. Five were held in the southern hemisphere. The conference was held five times in Asia, once in South Africa and once in South America. Before 2009 the Colloquium had only been held

twice in Asia, once in Africa and once in South America. At that point the vast majority of events were held in the northern hemisphere, including nine in Europe. Between 2009 and 2015 it was held three times in Asia, where it will return in October of this year, with the 2016 colloquium taking place in South Korea.

I have chosen this conference as it is a major event in healthcare and medicine, the field in which I worked, and so I am familiar with it. This example may or may not reflect every other international conference – perhaps not. But I think it is a useful example because it indicates how difficult it is to find a suitable meeting venue for an international organisation whose members are spread worldwide.

Border control

Returning to the story of my travels to New Zealand. On arriving at Auckland after travelling for almost 36 hours I faced the inevitability of the queue at border control and, because I was from far afield, questioning from a border security officer. I was tired and dazed and confused and unprepared for the bureaucratic hoops I had to jump through to officially enter the country. I completed the non-resident entry form and was asked to sit down at what looked like a supermarket counter with a very pleasant officer who wanted to know the purpose of my visit.

“Oh I am presenting my PhD work at a conference”, I said. “What is your PhD about?” he asked. So I told him and was surprised that he seemed genuinely interested. I would have been touched with this attention had I not felt like a zombie after the arduous journey and relieved to be alive. He asked me what conference I was going to (he had already told me Queenstown – the venue – was a beautiful place for it). I can only imagine that when he heard “pharmacy workshop”, he was able to empathise with my tinnitus because of the alarm bells ringing in his head. I had to explain to him that not only was I *not* a pharmacist, *nor* was the conference about drugs or chemicals, but most important of all that I *did not* have any such products on my person, which was confirmed by the scanning of my luggage.

The conference was useful for me. I presented, networked, saw sights and enjoyed the usual camaraderie of the conference dinner. Having gone halfway around the world, I had to return home. To do so I would circumnavigate the globe, with a stopover in Los Angeles. I never bothered to inquire if it was standard procedure or not that all passengers from such flight were questioned, fingerprinted and kept in a large room that not only did not have any windows but was pumping out CNN on its TVs (which I likened at the time to indoctrination by propaganda). To this day I clearly remember the conversation I had with the US official at the customs desk because I wrote about it in my travelogue on the journey back.

US official: “so why are you travelling to London?”

Me: “I live in the United Kingdom.”

*US official: *repeats the question**

Me: “I am returning from New Zealand to London via Los Angeles.” (I decided not to tell him that I was returning from an international social pharmacy workshop after my experience in Auckland.)

*US official: *repeats the question before adding* “Business or pleasure?”*

Me (by now quite tired from the flight and the questioning): “both as I live there.”

*US official: *repeats the question**

Me (using all my superhero energy to suppress the urge to make light of the absurdity of the conversation): “both as I live there.”

US official: “Okay, pleasure.”

I have relayed my accounts of border control with a mirth that belied a more serious intention. I had initially intended to make a gloomy postulation that I would not find it difficult to imagine that some academics from minority groups might consider such potential or actual treatment off-putting or, worse, stop them from travelling to conferences in certain parts of the world. I would have liked to have thought that this was just a scaremongering prediction on my part, although my suspicion was that in the current climate such agencies might occasionally fall back on assumptions as the basis for their decisions when processing entrants. Unfortunately in this post-Brexit-vote world I did not have to wait so long to see this fear come true. At the recent African Studies Association of the UK conference, held in Cambridge, it was reported that an unconfirmed number of delegates were [unable to attend due to visa refusals or inability to enter the country](#).

So what?

Barriers to an academic's travel can impact on continuing professional development and the sharing of knowledge. Not all academics have the freedom at all times to travel to conferences or other academic events held outside their universities. This potentially has consequences for their professional development if, for example, they, are unable to attend a workshop at a conference which runs training in a novel research method. Where a conference is held will impact on who attends and, more so, who does not, which will then have a consequence for what is and isn't discussed and so have implications for knowledge sharing. Unfortunately in this day and age, the barriers go beyond health concerns and distance; and instead reflect the politics of our times.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the author

Dr Donald J Nicolson worked in academic research for 13 years and was a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow. He now works as a freelance writer and is writing a book for publication about academic conferences. He holds a PhD in Health Services Research from the University of Leeds. He can be found digitally [@the_mopster](#), retweeting things that amuse him, venting his anger at the political environment and making random observations on the absurdity of life. His book, *Academic Conferences as Neoliberal Commodities*, will be published by Palgrave Macmillan in early 2017.

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