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Towards the development of an evaluation questionnaire for academic conferences

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Abstract

Each year, academic conferences are held at destinations throughout the world. These conferences provide benefits to the host destination's economy as well as to the conference participants. Involving travel and accommodation, academic conferences can be classified as business tourism. Academics often have a range of conferences from which to choose. The conference experience therefore may be important in the decision to reattend or recommend a conference to other potential attendees. While many conference organizers distribute a "conference evaluation sheet" at the end of a conference, there is no evidence of a standardized questionnaire that evaluates the entire conference experience. The objective of this work is to make such a contribution by identifying the attributes that are deemed to be important to the academic conference attendee and assigning a measurement scale for each attribute. The attributes are identified by way of a review of the services and tourism literature, and through semistructured interviews with academics. In addition to evaluating the entire conference experience, the questionnaire can be used to make longitudinal comparisons of a conference, and comparisons between conferences.

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TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE FOR ACADEMIC CONFERENCES

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Each year, academic conferences are held at destinations throughout the world. These conferences provide benefits to the host destination's economy as well as to the conference participants. Involving travel and accommodation, academic conferences can be classified as business tourism. Academics often have a range of conferences from which to choose. The conference experience therefore may be important in the decision to reattend or recommend a conference to other potential attendees. While many conference organizers distribute a "conference evaluation sheet" at the end of a conference, there is no evidence of a standardized questionnaire that evaluates the entire conference experience. The objective of this work is to make such a contribution by identifying the attributes that are deemed to be important to the academic conference attendee and assigning a measurement scale for each attribute. The attributes are identified by way of a review of the services and tourism literature, and through semistructured interviews with academics. In addition to evaluating the entire conference experience, the questionnaire can be used to make longitudinal comparisons of a conference, and comparisons between conferences.

Key words: Meetings, incentives, conventions, and exhibitions (MICE); Academic conferences; Evaluation questionnaire

Introduction

Tourism is classified into leisure and business tourism. While leisure tourists participate in recreational activities, business tourists travel primarily to satisfy work requirements. Business tourism has been broken down into the classifications of meetings, incentives, conventions, and exhibitions—sometimes referred to as MICE. While the incentives market of business travel refers to sponsored travel

designed to motivate superior employee performance (Peters & Jones, 1996), the meetings, conventions, and exhibitions markets have a similar characteristic, which involves delegates (from domestic or international locations) coming together for some common purpose, usually over a short period of time (Peters & Jones, 1996).

Business tourism possesses a number of features which distinguish it from leisure tourism. Business tourists are recognized as having the highest

expenditure level of all tourists (Rittichainuwat, Beck, & Lalopa, 2001). This can be attributed to the more inelastic nature of their travel demand, as travel is a work requirement and often funded by the employer. An additional characteristic of business tourism is that the demand may exist outside of peak leisure tourism seasons, thus countering what would be a downturn in overall tourism demand (Oppermann, 1996b). Convention travel may also outpace leisure travel demand during periods of economic downturns (Abbey & Link, 1994).

Despite the distinction made between business and leisure travel, the boundaries often overlap (Davidson, 2003; Shoemaker, Lewis, & Yesawich, 2007), as many business travelers may consume leisure tourism products during their travel (Peters & Jones, 1996). Such expenditure may not only benefit the host region (Johnson, 1998), but also the locations included in the traveler's trip pattern (Lue, Crompton, & Fesenmaier, 1993). Business travelers may also be accompanied by their spouse/partner (Abbey & Link, 1994), who may participate in social programs and consume other leisure tourism offerings. Business travel provides an opportunity for participants to become acquainted with a destination, with a possibility of returning as a leisure traveler (Abbey & Link, 1994; Oppermann, 1996b). Satisfied attendees may also promote a destination through positive word of mouth.

Conventions, including conferences, are a major component of business tourism (Peters & Jones, 1996). Between 1990 and 1995, there was a 64% increase in the number of international visitors who attended conventions in Australia (Peters & Jones, 1996). Conventions can be classified as being "corporate" or "association." Corporate conventions are organized and sponsored by corporations and it is usually mandatory for employees to attend. Association conferences, on the other hand, are organized by membership-based organizations that represent professional, trade, or special interest groups. Attendance is usually funded by the individual or an organization that the individual is affiliated with. Participants have discretion as to their attendance (Lee & Back, 2005; Oppermann, 1996b).

Overall, business tourism contributes substantially to an economy by attracting delegates who spend on accommodation, transportation, food, and attractions (Weber & Ladkin, 2003). Host destinations may

benefit from foreign revenues, a broadening of their tax base (Abbey & Link, 1994), increased employment, investment in local infrastructure, stronger business relations, education and training, as well as opportunities to exchange and develop ideas and technology (Peters & Jones, 1996).

Association conventions often attract a large number of delegates to the host destination (Rittichainuwat et al., 2001) and can provide a revenue stream for the association. Oppermann (1995), however, estimates that annual conferences are attended only by 39% of the association's membership, reducing the potential income for both the association and the destination. Such attendance levels may be explained by perceptions of low value gained from attending a conference (Griffin, Malone, & Cooper, 2005), competing conferences, financial costs, and opportunity costs.

Figure 1 distinguishes the leisure and business tourism market, and provides a breakdown of the latter. Academic conferences, which are the focus of this study, form a segment within the association market. Characteristics of academic conferences are now presented.

Academic Conferences

In 2010, 87 academic conferences were scheduled to take place in Australia, 174 in the UK, and 1,352 in the US (2009 search on Papers Invited). Academic conferences provide the opportunity for individuals with a common interest to gather for the pursuit of professional or personal goals (Hobson, 1993; McCarthy, McDonald, Soroczak, Nguyen, & Rashid, 2004). They create an environment of mutual revelation allowing attendees to gain feedback relative to their work, learn about other's work (McCarthy et al., 2004), and provide a forum to discuss, present, and debate new conceptual thoughts, research, and views (Hobson, 1993). Further, conferences also provide the opportunity for attendees to break from regular routine and satisfy their need for change (Oppermann & Chon, 1997).

Potential conference attendees usually have a range of conferences to choose from. Attendance is however often restricted by constraints such as time and money. This results in academics having to choose between conferences. Attendance may depend on the perceived value of the conference.

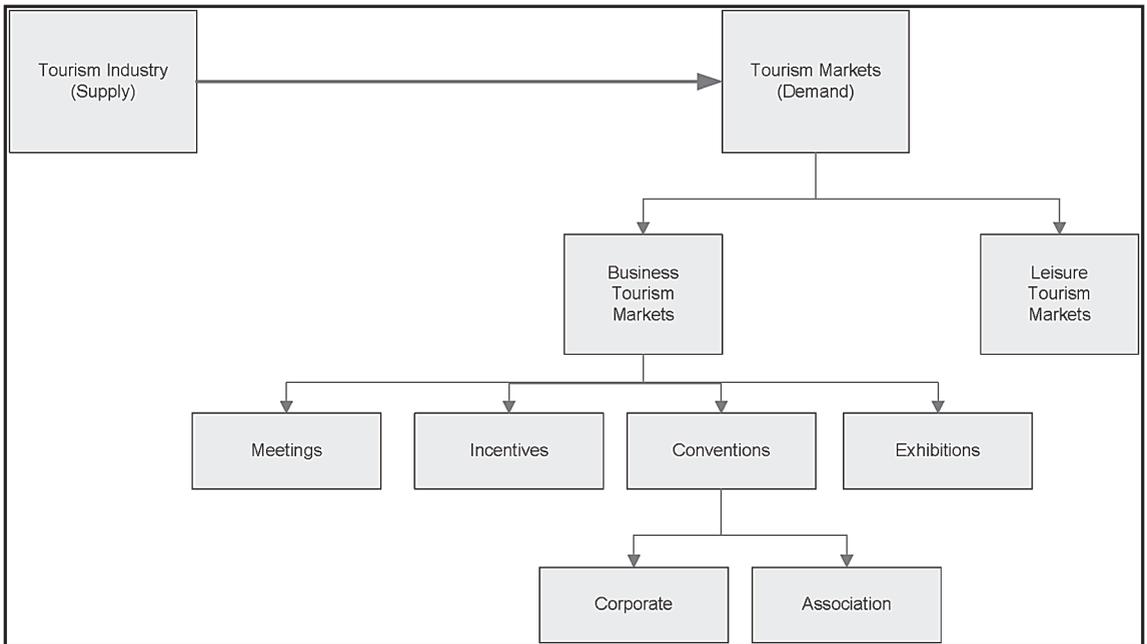


Figure 1. The tourism industry and its business tourism markets. Source: Authors.

Like any other product or service in a competitive market, conference organizers should ensure that conference attendees perceive and realize value in the exchange. Such an understanding can be assisted if all the reasons for attending, or not attending, a conference are considered.

Conference Attendance

The conference selection process in association travel is arguably similar to the leisure tourists' destination selection process; in that both provide the individual with variety and freedom to make a decision (Oppermann, 1996b; Oppermann & Chon, 1997). Several "push factors," such as the attendees' desire for career progression, and "pull factors," such as the offerings of the conference and the host destination, may influence attendance (Oppermann & Chon, 1997). Tourism marketing academics, for instance, may choose to present their research in tourism conferences, such as the Council for Australian University Tourism and Hospitality Education Conference (CAUTHE), or more general marketing conferences, such as the European Marketing Academy's Conference (EMAC) and the Australian New Zealand Marketing Conference

(ANZMAC). Factors, such as cost, timing, perception of the host destination, and perceived personal and professional benefits, are likely to influence the decision (Oppermann & Chon, 1997).

Cost may be a major inhibitor for conference attendance, particularly if there is limited employer contribution (Rittichainuwat et al., 2001). Griffin et al. (2005) found that conference attendance was declining partly due to the dwindling availability of funds, and that attendees are often reluctant to commit personal funds (Oppermann, 1995). The timing of the conference may also influence an individual's decision (Oppermann & Chon, 1997). Conflicts between conferences and other professional and personal commitments may deter attendance (Oppermann, 1995; Oppermann & Chon, 1997).

Academic conferences play a key role in professional development (Alaimo, 2004; Oppermann & Chon, 1997). They provide different kinds of interaction ranging from keynote speeches, research presentations, panels, informal presentations, and casual discussions (McCarthy et al., 2004). Such interactions contribute towards building one's network within academia. Conferences can create an environment conducive to idea sharing allowing for individuals to remain up to date with current

research (Griffin et al., 2005) and provide the opportunity for collaboration (Swift, Glascoff, Jones, & Grant, 1998). For some attendees, conferences may provide the opportunity of reunion with one's professional colleagues (Oppermann, 1996b). Academic conferences may also assist with gaining new employment. For example, Ayers and Fugate (1987) argue that Marketing faculty administrators tend to view academic conferences as a place to recruit new staff and learn about the job market.

Research benefits are another reason for attendance at academic conferences. Academics would typically attend to present a paper and obtain feedback from the audience (Griffin et al., 2005; Hobson, 1993). The feedback is considered an imperative part of the conference process enabling academics to learn from their peers and enhance the quality of their publications (Oppermann, 1997). Attendees also benefit from speakers who are experts within their field (Alaimo, 2004). This can help generate ideas for research (Alaimo, 2004). Importantly, if the research being presented by others is related to an individual's field of interest, the likelihood of attendance is higher (Griffin, et al., 2005).

The location of the conference plays an important role in conference attendance (Lee & Back, 2005). While the destination is typically decided by conference organizers or influenced by the associations executives, poor destination selection could result in lower attendance. A study involving members of the American Accounting Association (Griffin et al., 2005) supports this claim when 83% of the members indicated geographic location as an important factor. Destination factors that influence attendance include accessibility, availability of facilities, affordability, attractions, and safety (Lee & Back, 2005). The availability of direct transportation to the venue has also been noted to influence attendance (Oppermann, 1995). In addition, Oppermann and Chon (1997) suggest that climate may be important, so conditions not favored by a potential attendee may be avoided.

The image of the destination will likely influence the conference attendees' decision (Oppermann & Chon, 1997). Annual conferences that take place near major tourist attractions may increase conference attendance (Rittichainuwat et al., 2001). This may also be important, as attendees often travel

with their partners, who may value the attractions of the destination.

Willingness to reattend a conference is consistent with consumer behavior literature dealing with the relationships between expectations, performance, satisfaction, and future behavior (Hallowell, 1996; Severt, Want, Chen, & Breiter, 2007). A discussion of the importance of satisfaction of academic conferences is now presented.

Influence of Satisfaction on Academic Conference Attendance

Being service oriented, academic conferences can be considered as a subset of the service economy. Providing superior service quality is essential to the sustainability of services (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). Consistent with this argument, conferences need to focus on a high level of service quality to remain competitive (Weber & Ladkin, 2003).

Satisfaction with a service can lead to customer loyalty by way of repeat purchase. This was argued by Hallowell (1996) when studying the relationship between customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and the company's profitability within the finance sector. In the context of academic conferences, it is expected that satisfied attendees will be more likely to be future attendees. Severt et al. (2007) argue that there is a relationship between satisfaction and conference loyalty. If an attendee is satisfied with a conference experience, they might rank it higher than other alternatives in the future (Oppermann & Chon, 1997). Satisfaction with the conference experience is, however, insufficient to guarantee that attendees will return (Severt et al., 2007) as other factors, such as cost, destination, research, and personal/professional commitments may be influential.

Regardless of the influence of other factors, if conference attendees are not satisfied, they will be less likely to attend in the future. Negative experiences may change the attendee's attitude and influence future attendance (Oppermann & Chon, 1997). However, there may be some instances where low satisfaction may not deter conference attendance. For example, an academic's career progression may be assisted by conference presentations. A poor experience at a renowned conference may not be a deterrent due to the brand equity of the

conference. However, attendees may communicate negative word of mouth and in the long-run, the value (brand equity) of that conference may be reassessed by “the market.”

The evaluation of service quality is not made solely on the outcome of a service, but also on the “process” of service delivery (Parasuraman et al., 1985). This view was previously presented by Pizam, Neumann, and Reichel (1978), who argued that in order to measure customer satisfaction with a service one must identify and measure its different performance dimensions. Individuals evaluate an experience as a summation of all service encounters and not just the interaction with the primary service provider (Mattsson, 1994). For example, Braithwaite (1992) proposes a paradigm of tourism suggesting that a travel experience is a composition of different services that form part of its value chain that comprises of every service from departure to return. Each encounter represents an experience point for the customer that may differ in value and expectations. Overall, customers assess the total experience across the entire tourism value chain. Braithwaite’s (1992) value chain has relevance to both leisure and business travelers. Similarly, Pizam et al. (1978) suggest that tourism is an intangible amalgamation of interrelated components and so may experience a halo effect wherein satisfaction or dissatisfaction with one component leads to satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the whole experience. Conferences, therefore, may be considered as an amalgam of service suppliers (Otto & Ritchie, 1996) including transportation, accommodation, hospitality, and convention providers. This view is also supported by Leiper (2004) and Kerr and Lewis (2010), who argue that tourism is produced by contributions from businesses different industries.

Based on the foregoing argument, an informed assessment of a conference needs to consider all of the components of the conference value chain. This experience may be divided into three stages: *before*, *during*, and *after* the conference. Figure 2 shows these stages with examples of experience encounters.

Overall satisfaction is achieved if expectations are met by all the service providers involved in the experience (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2007). Ayres and Fugate (1987) identified the outcomes attendees expected from conferences. Based on survey data collected from College Business Administration

Deans and Faculty, the top five expected outcomes were:

- Helps me generate new research ideas;
- If presenting paper, increases the probability that I will continue development of this topic for further dissemination/publication;
- Exposure to influential people in my discipline;
- Expansion of knowledge in my discipline;
- To learn new teaching methodologies/techniques.

By understanding the attendees’ expectations and the factors that influence their decision to attend, conference organizers can more effectively develop a marketing mix for academic conferences. A standardized and holistic questionnaire to assess an academic conference would better assist both conference organizers and potential attendees. Further, if the questionnaire has a standardized design, comparisons between conferences can also be made. This study contributes to the development of a questionnaire which is both holistic and standardized.

Benefits of a Holistic and Standardized Questionnaire

Although conference organizers often distribute feedback sheets, these can often be “quick and dirty,” and are distributed at the end of the conference when many attendees have left. (Interestingly, although a conference feedback sheet should be a census of attendees, it often results in a biased sample consisting of conference executives and the most loyal attendees.) Further, the questionnaire often evaluates only “the conference” and not the entire conference experience. To illustrate this point, the primary author of this article attended an academic conference and although the conference was good, the overall experience was considered very poor, primarily due to the cancelation of flights by an airline. The author had earlier completed a positive conference evaluation, but held a negative view of the entire experience. The need for a broader questionnaire can therefore be argued to assess the entire conference experience.

This study identifies attributes relevant to conference satisfaction and develops a holistic and standardized questionnaire (HaSQ) for academic conferences. This work adds to previous studies,



Figure 2. Stages of academic conferences. Source: Authors.

such as Sever et al. (2007) and Rittichainuwat et al. (2001), who identified factors that motivated conference attendance. Similar to Braithwaite's (1992) argument, this study adopts a holistic view of conferences and identifies items relevant to the "entire" conference experience. Although this may involve experiences beyond the direct control of the conference organizers, it is argued that they can work with suppliers to better cater to attendee's requirements.

Oppermann (1995) suggests that research focused exclusively on conference participants and nonparticipants is scarce. Relatively little research has been conducted on conference attendees (Lee & Back, 2005; Oppermann, 1995, 1996a, 1996b). To the knowledge of the authors, no studies have attempted to evaluate the overall experience of convention participants, or in this case, academic conference attendees. Organizers and third-party stakeholders, such as Papers Invited, could use the HaSQ to develop an overall quality rating for conferences. Organizers could use the feedback to enhance the conference experience in the future as well as to establish benchmarks for service performance. Attendees could use the rating score obtained to compare conferences. The information obtained through the HaSQ could help universities prioritize funding for conferences attendance. A rating of the overall conference experience will be of value to academic units who outsource the conference organization function to professional conference organizers, and also destination marketers seeking to attract conferences and tourism, generally, to their location.

Methodology

To develop a list of items relevant to academic conferences, a literature review was first conducted. This was followed by semistructured interviews with academics to identify attributes which may not have been reported in literature. A similar approach was used by Severt et al. (2007) to examine the motivation, perceived performance, and behavioral intentions of convention attendees.

Seven academics from the disciplines of Management and Marketing were interviewed by the primary author of this article to identify their motivations for attending (or not attending) a conference and to understand the attributes they considered important. Participants ranged from Associate Professors to Lecturers, and all had at least 5 years of experience within academia and attended at least one academic conference each year. Although the number of participants was relatively small, the themes that emerged from the latter interviews were repetitive, suggesting that it was unlikely that new items would be revealed by conducting further interviews (MacDougall & Fudge, 2001; Pandit, 1996).

Each interview lasted about 45 minutes. Five questions guiding the interview protocol were:

1. What are the factors you consider important before attending a conference?
2. What factors are important to you while at the conference?
3. What do you hope to get out of attending a conference?

4. What factors would influence you not to attend a conference?
5. What was the last academic conference you attended? (Discuss the experience)

The purpose of the analysis was not to quantify the findings, but to identify attributes relevant to evaluate the conference experience. The interviews were analyzed using the method recommended by Burnard, (1991), wherein like comments were grouped together to identify common themes (attributes). The identified attributes were then compared to those revealed in the literature review, after which they were grouped based on the stages of the conference experience.

Identification of Items for the HaSQ

A total of 26 attributes were identified from the interviews. Thirteen of the 26 attributes were considered as being relevant for the HaSQ. These are presented in Table 1. The remaining 13 were not relevant for evaluating the conference experience (examples include: “other prior commitments” and “financial cost of attendance”). Additional attributes included in the HaSQ were identified from business tourism literature.

Structure of the HaSQ

The questionnaire is divided into five parts and is shown in the Appendix. Parts One to Four relate to aspects of the conference, while Part Five obtains general information about the respondent.

Table 1
Factors That Influence Conference Evaluation

Accessibility of destination
Convention venue
Destination
Education or being up to date
Facilities should be appropriate and work
Feedback
Networking opportunities
General Organisation of conference
Organization of conference (accommodation)
Organization of conference (presentation)
Organization of conference (transfers)
Research and rresentation
Style of discussion

A 5-point scale is used to evaluate the transportation to and from the conference, the accommodation, food, and activities organized as part of the conference and the conference itself. A 5-point scale is considered appropriate because increasing the number of scale points could result in nonresponse bias and respondent fatigue (Lehmann & Hulbert, 1972). However, fewer categories would reduce the opportunity for respondents to discriminate between options, thus reducing the effectiveness of the scale. The provision is made for respondents to include additional comments about an individual item in the HaSQ or a part of the experience.

Part Four of the questionnaire contains three open-ended questions dealing with “likes,” “dislikes,” and “recommendations.” Part Five of the HaSQ deals with demographic, employment, and conference attendance issues. Rittichainuwat et al. (2001) argue that conference organizers need to understand the socioeconomic profiles of their members and potential attendees to organize conferences specialized to their needs. This part of the HaSQ therefore helps develop a profile of the attendees.

Questionnaire Administration

It is intended that the questionnaire be administered online and sent to attendees after the conference. This will allow for a holistic evaluation of the entire experience, thus fulfilling the purpose of the HaSQ. Although debates exist about the value of online questionnaires as opposed to offline (Finegan & Allen, 1994), the benefits of online data collection include lower costs, higher speed, as well as greater reach (Deutskens, Ruyter, Wetzels, & Oosterveld, 2004). Typically, attendees of academic conferences are competent and frequent users of the Internet, further justifying the online administration of the questionnaire.

Obtaining a Score

Numeric values are assigned to each item where a 5-point scale is used, with higher satisfaction levels being allocated higher scores. A rating of poor is assigned a value of “1,” while a rating of excellent is assigned a value of “5.” This method of rating has been used by Yoo and Donthu (2001) to evaluate the perceived quality of internet shopping sites.

When respondents choose “not applicable” or fail to provide a response, it is recommended that the response be treated as a “missing value” and be omitted when computing the mean satisfaction score for that component. In addition to the mean values relative to each item, the standard deviation should be computed to show the range of responses. A broader range may reveal groups of satisfied and dissatisfied respondents (possibly a bimodal distribution).

Responses across the scaled items in each part could be averaged to provide a score for that part of the HaSQ. An average of all the scaled items in the HaSQ can also be computed for an overall assessment score of the conference. Feedback provided through the open-ended questions in the HaSQ should be reviewed and coded according to key themes.

Conclusion

This study contributes to research on academic conventions and conferences by developing a holistic and standardized questionnaire to evaluate conference experiences. This was achieved by identifying attributes reported in literature and those identified through semistructured interviews to develop a battery of attributes relevant to evaluating conferences. A combination of 5-point scales and open-ended questions was considered effective in gaining an evaluation of the entire conference

experience. It is anticipated that the use of such information would benefit both conference attendees and organizers. Attendees could use the score obtained to influence their conference attendance. Organizers could use the feedback provided to improve on aspects rated poorly and evaluate performance compared to previous years. Academics could also use the questionnaire to compare different conferences based on items measured in the HaSQ. Destination marketers and convention service providers could also use the HaSQ to obtain feedback.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the questionnaire was developed based on data obtained from literature and interviews, it lacks empirical testing. Empirical evaluation of the questionnaire would allow refinements to be made. Future research planned by the authors will aim to empirically test the questionnaire at conferences. This will allow for a comparison of conference experiences and a refinement of the items included in the questionnaire. Further, the sample interviewed to develop the attributes used in the questionnaire was from the disciplines of Management and Marketing. This could suggest the possibility of a bias in favor of conference experiences within those fields. Future research could evaluate the attributes included in the questionnaire, in regard to conferences conducted in other disciplines.

Appendix: Academic Conference Questionnaire

This questionnaire divides your conference experience into transportation, accommodation, education and hopefully relaxation. Please indicate your opinion, by placing a tick ✓ in the appropriate cell, regarding the experiences encountered relative to each of the attributes.

PART 1: Transportation to and from Conference: Your Evaluation of Experiences/Services

To Conference				From Conference			
1. Transport to Airport (From place of origin)	2. Experience at Airport Terminal	3. Flight to Conference City	4. Transfer to Conference Venue	5. Transfer to Airport From Conference Venue	6. Experience at Airport Terminal	7. Flight from Conference	8. Transfer from airport (To residence or specified destination.)

Excellent
 Good
 Average
 Not so good
 Poor
 Not
 Applicable

Include any additional comments regarding each experience (optional)

9. Other comments regarding transport (optional):

PART 2: Accommodation, Food and Activities/Entertainment: Your Evaluation of Experiences/Services

10. The accommodation was	11. The breaks between presentations were	12. The food at the conference venue was	13. The social program at the conference was	14. The networking opportunity at the conference was	15. The destination experience was	16. The tour(s) organized by the conference was
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Excellent
 Good
 Average
 Not so good
 Poor
 Not Applicable

Include any additional comments regarding each experience (optional)

17. Other comments regarding the conference (optional):

PART 3: The Conference: Your Evaluation of Experiences/Services

18. The peer review process was	19. The registration process was	20. The plenary sessions were	21. My experience as a presenter was	22. My experience as a member of audience in sessions was	23. Admin./ technical support at the conference was	24. The feedback obtained from the conference was	25. The contribution to my research knowledge was
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Excellent
 Good
 Average
 Not so good
 Poor
 Not Applicable

Include any additional comments regarding each experience (optional)

26. Other comments regarding the conference (optional):

PART 4: Other Comments

27. What did you like most about the conference?

28. What did you like least about the conference?

29. Can you make any comments/suggestions as to how this conference could be improved?

PART 5: General Information

Please complete the following questions by placing a tick in the box which best indicates your response or complete in the space provided.

30. Home city/town and country: _____

31. Gender: Male Female

32. What age category do you fit in?

- 24 or less
- 25 to 34
- 35 to 44
- 45 to 54
- 55 or more

33. In what capacity did you attend the conference? (Tick the one which is most relevant)

- Delegate presenting
- Delegate not presenting
- Industry representative
- Other (please specify)

34. What is your academic position?

- Student
- Associate Lecturer/Lecturer
- Senior Lecturer/Assistant Professor
- Associate Professor
- Professor
- Other (please specify)
- Not applicable

35. How many times have you attended this conference?

- First time
- Second time
- Third time
- Fourth time
- Five or more times

36. How many international conferences do you attend each year?

- I do not attend international conferences
 One
 Two or three
 Three or four
 Five or more

38. Will you attend this conference next year? Yes Not sure No

39. Would you recommend this conference to others? Yes No

40. Did your partner travel with you to attend this conference? Yes No

41. Did you travel as part of a group (from your organization) to attend this conference? Yes No

Thank you for your time to complete this questionnaire.

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