

Developing a Tool to Evaluate the Benefits of Conferences

Leif Hem

NHH Norwegian School of Economics

Nina Marianne Iversen

BI Norwegian Business School

Carmel Foley

UTS

Deborah Edwards

UTS

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Abstract

Conferences are pivotal platforms for knowledge exchange, innovation, and societal progress, yet their broader benefits remain underexplored. Traditional evaluation frameworks emphasize tourism expenditure and delegate satisfaction, overlooking multidimensional impacts on science, industry, and communities. This study advances the development of a comprehensive tool to measure these benefits by analysing data from 3,134 conference attendees across diverse sectors and regions. Using importance-performance analysis and exploratory factor analysis, two key constructs emerged: benefits for scientific communities; and benefits for destination communities (social and environmental dimensions). Respondents considered scientific advancement, industry innovation, and attracting global talent very important, but conferences delivered less than expected. Sustainability aspects such as equity, diversity, and reducing carbon footprints were valued but underperformed. Future research could operationalise these constructs into measurable indicators and validate them across conference types to inform evidence-based policy and enhance the transformative potential of conferences.

Keywords: conference evaluation, factor analysis, constructs

Track: Tourism Marketing

Introduction

Conferences represent a significant global industry, generating trillions of dollars and attracting millions of participants annually (López, 2025; Tourism Economics, 2025). Despite their scale and economic importance, the true value of conferences remains largely invisible, overshadowed by narrow evaluation metrics focused on tourism expenditure and delegate satisfaction. These measures fail to capture the broader, transformative benefits conferences deliver to scientific, destination, and global communities. As governments, universities, and industry stakeholders continue to invest heavily in conferences, the absence of robust frameworks for evaluating their multidimensional impacts poses a critical challenge for evidence-based policy and sustainable funding decisions (Dwyer & Forsyth, 2019; Foley et al., 2021).

The Case for Broader Evaluation

Conferences are not merely tourism drivers; they are platforms for knowledge exchange, innovation, and social progress (Foley et al., 2013; Edwards et al., 2017). Governments increasingly recognise the need for social impact indicators (OECD, 2023; European Commission, 2014), yet systematic measurement of conference benefits remains limited (Foley et al., 2021).

Defining Conference Benefits

A conference is defined as a formal gathering of individuals with shared interests, convened to present, discuss, and exchange knowledge (Edwards et al., 2017). Unlike fixed-location events, conferences are peripatetic, moving between destinations and creating ripple effects for local economies and societies. Benefits may be intentional, such as planned knowledge-sharing initiatives, or incidental, arising from unanticipated collaborations. They often persist beyond the event's duration, influencing professional practice, policy, and global well-being.

Theoretical Approach

The purpose of this paper is advancing the development of a tool for measuring the broader value of conferences. We use a framework published by Foley et al. (2026) and add a set of constructs grounded in a comprehensive research program spanning 2010–2025. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, online surveys, and secondary analysis across multiple sectors and regions, involving approximately 9,000 participants. The research evolved through iterative stages: initial

qualitative case studies, large-scale quantitative surveys, and international legacy analyses. This multi-method approach enabled the identification of recurring patterns and relationships, and the subsequent theorising of a set of constructs that can capture the diverse ways conferences generate value. In this second paper we analyse a large subset of the quantitative data to explore the importance and performance of items measured as well as identifying the underlying dimensions of the multi-item survey.

Methodology

Data for this study were collected via an online questionnaire distributed to the full population of attendees across 27 international conferences held in Sydney in 2023 and 2024, resulting in 3134 useable responses. Thirty-two per cent of respondents were practitioner delegates and 53 per cent were academic delegates. The vast majority attended the conference in person. Sixty-eight per cent of the respondents came from countries outside of Australia. The conferences represent a broad range of industry sectors including health, agriculture, technology, professional services, science, engineering, and infrastructure.

Findings

Importance/Performance

Respondents were asked to rate the importance and performance of each of the conference benefit items. Table 1 presents the total mean scores for all respondents on each of the importance and performance items. Scores were high for all items above the midpoint of 3 with the exception Trade and Investment (importance and performance) and Take Steps to Reduce the Carbon Footprint of the Event (performance). Scientific Advancement, Industry Innovation, and Attraction of Global Talent to the Conference Destination were consistently the highest across both importance and performance. For all items performance was lower than importance indicating that the conferences in this dataset could improve in these areas to meet the expectations of delegates.

Factor Analysis

Exploratory factor analysis was conducted to gain an understanding of the underlying structure of the items (Shrestha, 2021). The data's suitability was assessed by using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity. Based on Principal Component Analysis, two

factors were extracted with Direct Oblimin Rotation method. This rotation is considered an acceptable method allowing for correlated items. Both factor analyses showed Eigenvalues above 1 and the commonalities were all above the required level of 0.50 (Shrestha, 2021). Reliability was measured using Cronbach's Alpha. All factor scores met the requirement of higher than .7 (Shrestha, 2021). Cronbach's Alpha for importance factor 1 is .701 and importance factor 2 is .890. Cronbach's alpha for the performance factor 1 is .755 and performance factor 2 is .878.

Data were analysed using a comparison of importance and performance means of a set of items. Total means of each item were ranked across both importance and performance. One item, Trade and Investment, was eliminated from the analysis due to a low factor score (below 0.5). All items clearly loaded onto two factors for both importance and performance accounting for 65.16 per cent and 64.75 per cent of the variance for each factor analysis. Factor 1 for each analysis is labelled destination communities and Factor 2 is labelled scientific communities (including social and environmental dimensions).

Factor 1 represents the social and environmental considerations that attendees value when participating in conferences. They include opportunities to engage with local cultures and communities, address social issues, promote equity and diversity, support vulnerable groups, and acknowledge initiatives by the conference venue to reduce the event's carbon footprint. This factor corresponds with the constructs for destination communities as conceptualised by Foley, Edwards, Hergesell, Iversen, and Hem (forthcoming), emphasizing the role of conferences in generating positive societal and environmental impacts within host destinations.

Factor 2 reflects the professional and knowledge economy benefits, that can arise from conference participation. These benefits encompass access to new knowledge and ideas, opportunities for collaboration, industry innovation, and the attraction of global talent to the host destination. This factor corresponds to what Foley, Edwards, Hergesell, Iversen, and Hem (forthcoming) conceptualise as constructs for scientific communities, highlighting the contribution of conferences to knowledge creation, disciplinary development, and global research networks.

Implications for Research and Practice

The two factors destination community constructs and scientific community constructs, highlight the dual value of conferences for science and industry. For science, they enable knowledge transfer,

foster collaboration, and provide a basis for measuring research impact beyond attendance metrics. For industry, they drive innovation through academia-industry partnerships and the attraction of global talent, support sustainability goals, and stimulate regional economic development. Together, these constructs can position conferences as catalysts for integrated innovation ecosystems, aligning scientific advancement with societal and commercial benefits.

The constructs can be used to guide government in designing funding policies that reward conferences that deliver measurable knowledge transfer and sustainability outcomes. Incentives could be offered for events reducing carbon footprints and promoting social equity. Future research should focus on operationalising constructs into measurable indicators, validating instruments across diverse conference types, and applying advanced analytical techniques such as network analysis and structural equation modelling to explore causal pathways and cumulative effects.

Conclusion

Conferences are engines of innovation, collaboration, and social progress. Yet their full value remains obscured by narrow evaluation frameworks. By defining and categorising constructs that capture conference benefits, this study advances a more holistic understanding of conference impacts. The proposed model and constructs offer a practical and theoretical foundation for future research, enabling stakeholders to unlock the transformative potential of conferences in addressing the complex challenges of our time.

Ethical approval for each of these studies was secured from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Technology Sydney.

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Table 1. All 27 conferences: Means, standard deviations, number of respondents, and skewness/kurtosis – Importance and performance measures

	Mean	Sd	N	Skewness	Kurtosis
<u>Conference importance measures</u>					
The following questions seek to identify any economic and/or social impact of the business event you attended.					
In general, how important is it to you that business events enable/contribute to:					
1. Scientific advancement (new knowledge/ideas/technology/collaboration)	4.46	0.75	3.134	-1.60	3.25
2. Industry innovation (new knowledge/ideas/technology)	4.13	0.89	3.134	-1.11	1.30
3. Attraction of global talent to conference destination	3.87	1.02	3.134	-0.92	0.55
4. Actively embrace equity, diversity and inclusion strategies in the event program	3.70	1.07	3.015	-0.63	-0.20
5. Improved social policy	3.57	1.04	3.134	-0.57	-0.08
6. Provide opportunities to engage with Indigenous communities, experiences, knowledge and/or understanding	3.56	1.09	3.015	-0.46	-0.47
7. Support of vulnerable communities	3.52	1.17	3.134	-0.47	-0.60
8. Take steps to reduce the carbon footprint of the event	3.49	1.08	3.015	-0.41	-0.44
9. Address social issues	3.42	1.03	3.015	-0.38	-0.33
10. Trade and investment	2.90	1.25	3.134	-0.09	-1.03
<u>Conference performance measures</u>					
The following questions seek to identify any economic and/or social impact of the business event you attended.					
To what extent do you think this business event enabled/contributed to:					
1. Scientific advancement (new knowledge/ideas/technology/collaboration)	4.20	0.87	3.063	-.86	.19
2. Industry innovation (new knowledge/ideas/technology)	3.83	0.98	3.063	-.55	-.21
3. Attraction of global talent to conference destination	3.71	1.04	3.063	-0.49	-0.34
4. Actively embrace equity, diversity and inclusion strategies in the event program	3.35	0.99	2.976	-0.10	-0.38
5. Address social issues	3.23	1.02	2.976	-0.08	-0.40
6. Improved social policy	3.21	1.09	3.063	-0.10	-0.57
7. Provide opportunities to engage with Indigenous communities, experiences, knowledge and/or understanding	3.11	1.08	2.976	0.04	-0.61
8. Support of vulnerable communities	3.00	1.16	3.063	0.06	-0.76
9. Trade and investment	2.90	1.13	3.063	0.07	-0.66
10. Take steps to reduce the carbon footprint of the event	2.86	1.02	2.976	0.21	-0.27

Scale from 1 to 5

Table 2. All 27 conferences: Factor analysis of importance and performance measures

Conference importance-performance measures	IMPORTANCE		PERFORMANCE	
	Factor 1 Benefits for destination communities	Factor 2 Benefits for scientific communities	Factor 1 Benefits for destination communities	Factor 2 Benefits for scientific communities
1. Provide opportunities to engage with Indigenous communities, experiences, knowledge and/or understanding	.878		.880	
2. Address global social issues	.863		.821	
3. Actively embrace equity, diversity and inclusion strategies in the event program	.860		.820	
4. Take steps to reduce the carbon footprint of the event	.817		.775	
5. Support of vulnerable communities	.723		.675	
6. Improved social policy	.549		.544	
7. Industry innovation (new knowledge/ideas/technology)		.837		.855
8. Scientific advancement (new knowledge/ideas/technology/collaboration)		.762		.844
9. Attraction of global talent to conference destination		.752		.720