



Breaking Down Barriers: An Analysis of Inclusivity Challenges at Scientific Conferences

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Academic conferences are incredibly valuable opportunities for researchers. They offer a chance to share research and preliminary findings, receive feedback, and improve an ongoing work. In addition, conferences provide an excellent opportunity to meet other academics from all around the world, establish new connections, and become involved in existing networks. This can lead to future collaborations, studies, and projects that can greatly enhance academic career and improve general sense of well-being and belonging to academia. Regrettably, the ability for researchers from many countries to attend academic conferences is increasingly becoming a challenge due to the resulting economic hardships that the Covid-19 pandemic (among other factors) has caused. These issues, which are being felt globally, have had an especially significant impact on (semi)peripheral regions.

Geographical inequalities among countries

As one of the (semi)peripheral countries, Turkey, classified as an upper middle-income country in Europe & Central Asia by the World Bank, is currently facing significant economic challenges. Over the past two years, the cost of living has drastically increased, and the value of the Turkish currency (lira) continues to fall against the US dollar and Euro, leading to a decline in purchasing power. As a result, academics in Turkey face substantial financial barriers when attempting to attend international conferences, with the average attendance cost amounting to almost two-month salary of an assistant professor. Additionally, many universities and funding agencies do not provide sufficient financial support, if any at all. This raises the question of how academics from (semi)peripheries can engage in

international research and collaborations without attending international conferences. Such economic disparities deepen existing inequalities and geopolitical issues within academia.

—What to do to provide equity?—

In a recent paper that we presented at iConference2023, we explored the question of whether academic conferences are inclusive enough. Using iConference2023 as a case study, we looked at both physical and virtual events to answer this question. This was just the beginning of an ongoing study on the inclusivity of academic conferences. While the answer to the question is clear, recent issues faced by many academics from (semi)peripheries make it necessary to delve deeper into the topic. It should be noted that while virtual international events are a good alternative, they cannot replace face-to-face events in many aspects and have the potential to create different forms of inequality.

Conference costs exceed 40 countries' GDP per capita

The study conducted on the cost of attending iConference2023 showed some concerning results. It was found that for 40 countries, the cost of attending the physical event exceeded the level of GDP per capita in a respective country. Additionally, for 24 countries, the cost of attending ranged between half to the whole of the GDP per capita level. In contrast, only 33 countries had a cost of less than 5% of the respective GDP per capita level. It is important to highlight the common factors among these groups of countries based on their GDP level and geographical region to which they belong. Upon analysis, it was highlighted that all 40 countries with a cost exceeding the GDP per capita level are classified as low or lower-middle income, with 30 of them being located in Sub-Saharan Africa. Similarly, 22 of the 24 countries with a cost between half to all of their GDP are classified as lower-middle income, with Sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia & Pacific regions having the highest concentration. Finally, 32 of the 33 countries with a conference cost at less than 5% of their GDP per



capita level are classified as high income, with 21 of them being located in Europe or Central Asia. This information raises important questions about the impact of these cost disparities on academic inclusivity and cooperation.

The idea of virtual conference is not a great solution

This year, the iConference organizing committee provided a virtual alternative to the physical event, which was a great option for many people who were unable to attend the event in person. Attending the virtual conference required “just” paying the registration fee, which is a much more affordable option compared to the full costs of participation in face-to-face event. However, even the registration fee can be a burden for many countries. In fact, the early bird registration fee for iConference2023 (which was 250 US dollars) exceeded more than 10% of GDP per capital level for 54 countries, 34 of which are located in Sub-Saharan Africa. It is important to note that 10% of GDP per capital is an equivalent to more than one monthly salary. Additionally, the registration fee costs exceed the amount of GDP per capita for

seven countries and goes way beyond it for one country (Burundi). For example, for Turkey, the early bird virtual iConference registration fee of 250 US dollars amounts roughly to 25% of an average academic's monthly salary (which is already above the median salary) in Turkey.

The biggest challenge: Visa issues

Another important issue that was raised after the presentation of our paper is the visa-related problems that many academics face when trying to attend international conferences. Unfortunately, obtaining a visa is often a complicated and time-consuming process, and it can be an additional financial burden on top of the cost of attending the conference. The visa requirements are often based on the region you live in and the income level of your country. For example, attending the physical iConference2023 in Barcelona requires a visa for all low-income countries, most of the lower-middle income countries, half of the uppermiddle income countries, and a few of the high-income countries. This means that many academics face additional costs in terms of money, time, and effort just to be able to attend the conference. Many of them (especially from low-income countries) get their visas rejected.

Attending important conferences in the United States can be quite challenging and costly for many academics all over the world. The high registration fees and travel expenses alone can be overwhelming. However, on top of these costs, obtaining a visa for entry into the US can be a long and difficult process, adding an extra layer of difficulty and expense for attendees. Additionally, the time difference between the US and other parts of the world can make it challenging for some participants to attend sessions, particularly those in different time zones. As a result, when assessing the inclusivity of academic conferences on a global scale, it is essential to consider these factors.

What to do to provide equity?

It is evident that the issue of inequality in accessing conferences is not just a burden that lies on conference organizers' shoulders. Rather, it is a broader economic problem that requires addressing. However, we can take steps to make conferences more accessible to academics from (semi)peripheral regions. These steps might include making conference fees more affordable through options such as tariff waivers or scholarship opportunities. Additionally, offering virtual participation, as seen in the case of iConference2023, could be a cost-effective alternative for individuals in (semi)peripheral countries. When selecting physical conference venues, it is important to consider visa requirements and accessibility. Finally, we should explore the possibility of providing affordable accommodation options to support participation.

A Manifesto for Equity in Scientific Event Participation

Following our study on inequalities in scientific event participation and the unveiling of its stark realities, we have published a manifesto via the Scholarly Communication Network, which we established to support young researchers. You can access the manifesto at:

<https://schcommnetwork.com/a-manifesto-for-equity-in-scientific-event-participation/>

We invite you to sign the manifesto and share it within your academic circles, taking us one step closer to achieving equality within the inherently unequal academy.

— Further reading: Doğan, G., Taşkın, Z., Kulczycki, E., Szadkowski, K. (2023). How Inclusive Are the International Conferences? Attending Conferences in an Unequal World. In: Sserwanga, I. et al.

Information for a Better World: Normality, Virtuality, Physicality, Inclusivity. iConference 2023. Lecture Notes in Computer Science, vol 13971. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-28035-1_37

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