

How Inclusive are the International Conferences?: Attending Conferences in an Unequal World

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Abstract. Scientific conferences are essential venues where researchers present their preliminary research findings, establish new networks, and lay the groundwork for future collaborations. Geopolitical inequalities, however, overlaps with inequalities in academia and have effects on conference participation. These conferences, which are easily accessible for central countries and researchers from these countries, are often unaffordable for researchers from peripheral countries. The main aim of this study is to determine from which country researchers have an advantage in participating in scientific conferences. In this context, the iConference2023 to be held in Barcelona was taken as an example, and participation fees, accommodation, and transportation expenses were compared with the GDP per capita of 218 countries. Visa requirements were also evaluated. As a result of the research, while researchers from central countries with high-income levels can participate in conferences with very little expenditure, unaffordable costs often arise for researchers from regions with low-income levels. For this reason, sharp measures should be taken to ensure equal access opportunities for researchers.

Keywords: International Conferences, Inclusivity in Academia, Inequality in Academia.

1 Introduction

Scientific conferences are one of the most important information environments in academia, as they are the platforms where researchers present their new findings, discuss the results and exchange ideas. Sharing scientific research results and forming new networks are possible thanks to these events. However, like everything else, the structure of scientific conferences has also been greatly affected after the pandemic what, in the long term, can deepen the now severe geopolitical inequalities in academia.

It is known that conferences that can be held with a limited number of participants before the pandemic impose numerous problems on participants in terms of transportation to the conference venues, visa requirements, and extremely high fees [1, 2]. Although it is thought that these problems have decreased as the virtual conferences become widespread with the pandemic, the existing problems have transformed due to the differences between the responsibilities of researchers across genders [3], registration fees for virtual conferences [4], and the increasing inflation rates all over the world after the pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Although the conferences are slowly returning to “normal mode”, the economic problems faced by the whole world also affect the conference participations. Participation in on-site international conferences, which are indispensable to developing collaborations, becomes unaffordable especially for many academics/researchers from peripheral countries. Even though the organizers try to arrange hybrid meetings to reach more researchers, the registration fees for virtual conferences are still unaffordable for academics working in peripheral countries. The support of the affiliated institutions in paying the fees is either greatly reduced or completely cut off [5]. Note that most institutions do not support paying the fees of online conferences. On the other hand, even if the institutions cover the expenses or researchers are invited as keynotes to the events, it is usually possible only on a refund basis. What is important, researchers very often have to buy at least plane tickets in advance, but the purchasing power of researchers from the center and the periphery differs substantially. This, in turn, affects researchers’ decisions to attend conferences. Also, when several such events a year pile up, it is very difficult to sustain the flow of money. In view of these facts, the academia must work to make itself more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable than ever, as stated by Sharan Burrow in a report on life after Covid-19 [6].

This paper adds to a broader debate on the centers and peripheries in knowledge production [7, 8] and focuses on the inclusivity of scientific conferences and the inequalities in access that emerged between researchers from central and peripheral countries. We considered iConference2023 as a case and answered the following research questions.

- What are the average expenses of an international conference, and who can afford them? How does the affordability change when the conference is held online?
- Which countries have privileges to join the conferences in terms of visa requirements and transportation opportunities?

Having these questions answered in relation to the case selected, this paper engages into a discussion about what are the feasible solutions to the problem of unequal access to scientific conferences globally. While many research have dealt with the issue of existing barriers to access to scientific conferences [9, 10, 11], there are still few concrete proposals on what needs to be done to put an end to ongoing reproduction of the inequalities in the sphere of science communication [9]. This paper adds to the literature on designing the ways of providing equity in scholarly academic conferences.

2 Method

We created a dataset on the basis of data for 218 countries, and classified these countries using The World Bank’s country classification [12], in four groups by income (Low-Income, Lower-Middle, Upper-Middle, High-Income) and in seven groups by region (South Asia, Europe & Central Asia, Middle East & North Africa, East Asia & Pacific, Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America & The Caribbean, North America).

The most basic expenses for a conference are registration fee, travel and accommodation. If visa required for the host country (which is Barcelona, Spain for iConference2023), this will be an additional fee. Since visa costs vary and difficult to collect the data for it, it is not covered in this study. However, we collected data for visa requirements (except three countries) on a yes/no basis using Spainvisa.eu. The dataset includes two flight prices for each country, one is for best flight, the other is for an alternative cheap flight with a longer duration for most of the countries. Cost of the travel was calculated on 18 August 2022 using Skyscanner¹ for a round trip to Barcelona, Spain from the capital cities of each country (departure date: 26 March 2023, return date: 30 March 2023). Flight prices for 30 countries could not be determined.² Since there are two registration alternatives (physical and virtual) for iConference2023, we used early bird regular registration fees for physical event (\$ 385) and virtual event (\$ 265). We calculated the median accommodation price for four nights from March 26 to March 30 (\$ 613) using data on Booking.com.³ We considered all hotels/apartments within 1 km or less of the *Universitat Oberta de Catalunya*.

We calculated the cost of the iConference2023, consisting of registration, accommodation and travel expenses, for each country and compared it with GDP of the relevant country. We used GDP per capita (2020) gathered from the World Bank.⁴ All currencies are in USD.

We used Excel and JASP for data analysis, visualizations and calculations.

3 Findings

Since 2005, 17 iConferences have been held, mostly in the USA. iConferences were held online during the pandemic period (2020-2022). So far, two iConferences have been held in Europe and one iConference in China. iConferences are organized by iSchools, the international organization of library and information science schools. Figure 1 shows the geographic distribution of 123 libraries and information science schools under iSchools as of the end of 2022 and the regions hosting iConferences.

¹ <https://www.skyscanner.com/>

² American Samoa, Andorra, Belize, Bhutan, British Virgin Islands, Channel Islands, Eswatini, Greenland, Honduras, Kiribati, Korea, Dem. People's Rep., Libya, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Fed. Sts., Monaco, Nauru, New Caledonia, Northern Mariana Islands, Palau, Russian Federation, San Marino, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Syrian Arab Republic, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu, Virgin Islands (U.S.), West Bank and Gaza, Yemen, Rep.

³ <https://booking.com/>

⁴ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD>



Fig. 1. Geographic distribution of iSchools and iConferences

3.1 Conference costs of physical event by GDP per capita

One way to understand what it would cost to attend the iConference2023 for potential participants from different countries is to look at the ratio of the calculated conference costs to the GDP per capita of the respective countries. We calculated the ratio of conference costs to GDP per capita for both flight alternatives, and found that they do not differ considerably. Therefore, the cost calculated with best flight is considered for further analysis. The conference costs are at least as much as GDP per capita for 40 countries. All these 40 countries are from Low or Lower-Middle income groups, and 30 of them are Sub-Saharan countries (three from each of South Asia, East Asia & Pacific and Europe & Central Asia regions, and one from Latin America & The Caribbean).

The conference cost for 24 countries is between half and all of GDP per capita, all but two of which are in the Lower-Middle income group. The other two countries, Fiji and Suriname, are in the Upper-Middle income group. East Asia & Pacific and Sub-Saharan Africa stands out as the region. For an affordable conference, the ratio of conference cost to GDP per capita is expected to be as low as possible. There are 33 countries for which iConference2023 costs less than 5% of GDP per capita. All except Nicaragua are High income countries, and 21 of them from Europe & Central Asia region (three from each North America and East Asia & Pacific, two from Latin America & The Caribbean, and four from Middle East & North Africa).

Figure 2 shows that the power to attend scholarly academic conferences to develop collaborations, networks and future projects etc. by meeting the conference costs is directly related to the income level of the country. If researchers live in a High-income country, they are the luckiest ones, but unfortunately, researchers' chances in this sense decrease as their income decreases.

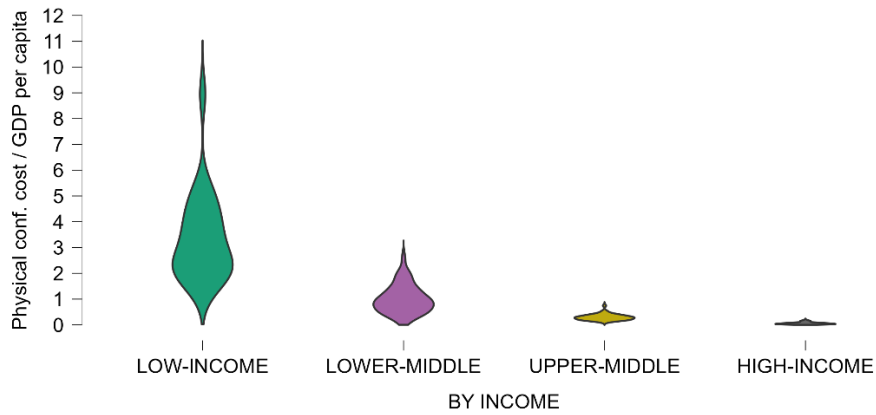


Fig. 2. The ratio of iConference2023 participation cost for physical event to GDP by country income groups.

3.2 Participation in the virtual event

Participating in virtual events can also be an option, although they do not offer as many opportunities as physical events in terms of communication and collaboration. Since the only fee to be paid for participation in the virtual event is the conference registration fee, virtual events are more affordable than physical events. However, they are still unaffordable for many countries as also presented in Figure 3.

There is one country where this fee exceeds GDP and seven countries where GDP is more than half. Except for Pakistan, these countries are Sub-Saharan African countries. Virtual event participation fee is more than 10% of GDP per capita for 54 countries consists of Low and Lower-Middle income countries 37 of which from Sub-Saharan Africa (six countries from each East Asia & Pacific and South Asia, three countries from Europe & Central Asia, two countries from Latin America & The Caribbean, and one country from Middle East & North Africa). Note that the 10% threshold corresponds to more than one month's salary, which is a very high price to attend a virtual conference.

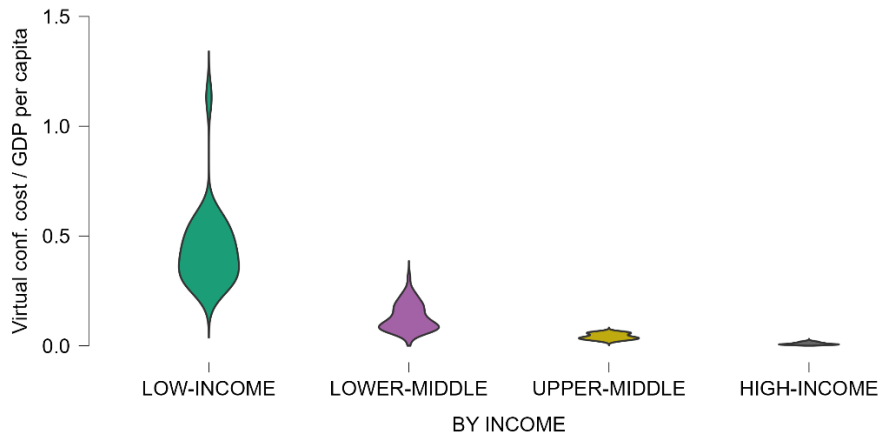


Fig. 3. The ratio of iConference2023 participation cost for virtual event to GDP by country income groups.

3.3 Visa requirement and transportation opportunities

Although it is not considered as a conference cost in this study due to data availability, visa requirement is an additional fee for many participants, especially from peripheral countries. The distribution of the countries required and not required visa for Spain, is shown in Figure 4. High-income countries have an advantage also in terms of visa requirements that Spain requests visa for only seven High-income countries, five of which are from Middle East & North Africa region (two from East Asia & Pacific region). All Low-income countries and many of the Lower-Middle income countries will have an additional conference expense to obtain a visa. Also, it is known that researchers from some peripheral countries such as Turkey have difficulties obtaining visa even if their papers are accepted to the conferences [13].

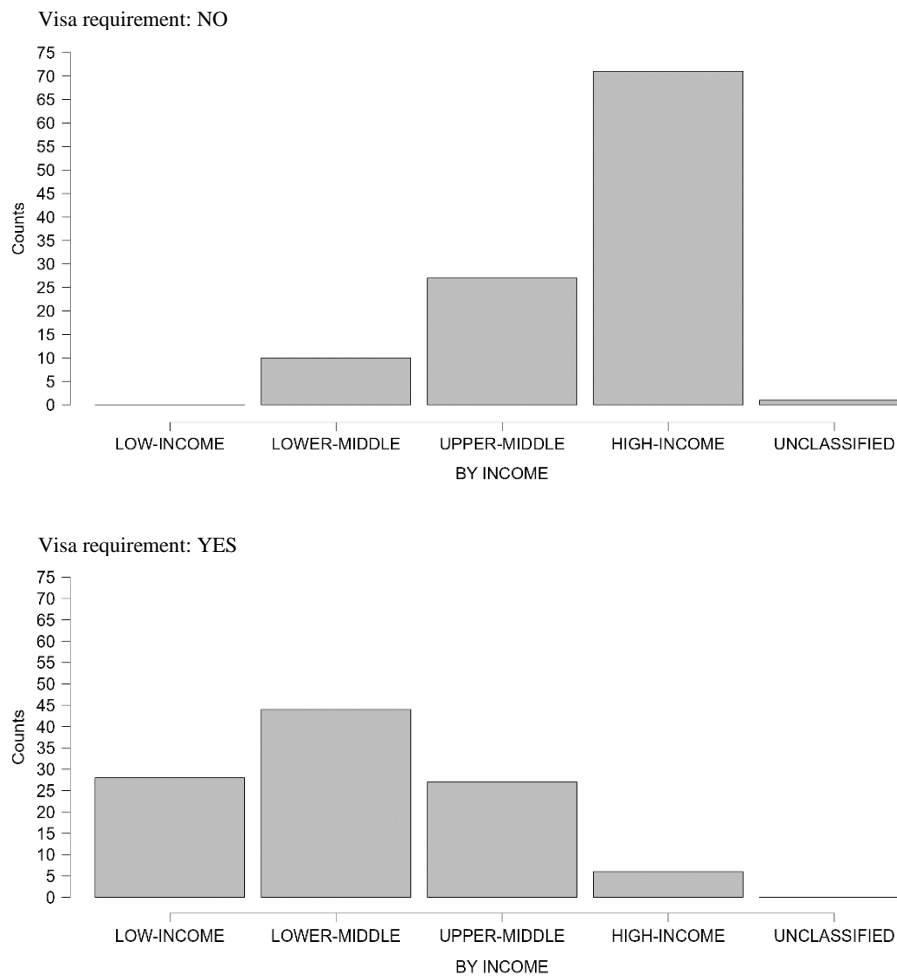


Fig. 4. Visa requirements for Barcelona, Spain by income groups of countries

Only flight to Barcelona is more than the half of GDP per capita for four countries, and more than 10% of GDP for 35 countries, among which the countries from Latin America & The Caribbean region stands out. Note that, the flight is less than 10% percent of GDP per capita for 77% of countries from European & Central Asia region, and less than 5% percent of GDP per capita for 54%.

4 Discussion

This paper presents the preliminary results of an ongoing project on ways of providing equity in scholarly academic conferences. In their current form, conferences only serve researchers from central countries which already have enough research funds to join conferences. Researchers from the periphery—who already have disadvantages in networking and access to research funding—are missing out on potential collaboration opportunities by being unable to participate in such events. Considering our results, to avoid these inequalities:

- Conference fees should be affordable for researchers from the periphery. There should be various tariffs and waiver options for different country groups. In addition, scholarship opportunities should be provided for young researchers and students. Most importantly, the chance to virtual participation in the conferences should be offered and this should be provided free of charge to the researchers of the peripheral countries.
- Conferences should be organized in countries that have fewer visa requirements and are easy to access. Also, it is important to provide cheap accommodation opportunities to the researchers.

In addition to the inequalities, there are many concerns about environmental sustainability [1]. Hosting conferences means thousands of researchers' carbon footprints. For this reason, this issue should be addressed in all aspects of future studies and applications that will provide equal opportunities to all researchers and that will cause the least harm to nature should be started.

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