

## TRAINING OR VACATION? THE ACADEMIC CONFERENCE TOURISM

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*The current study concentrates on factors affecting the intentions of academics attending an academic conference. It highlights the importance of academic conferences and academic conference tourism and discusses meetings, the convention industry and also their utility in the career development of academics. Through qualitative research and a review of the literature on conference tourism push and pull motivation factors are suggested. The power of these factors to predict the intention to attend an academic conference is examined through quantitative research and regression analysis. The results indicate that 'pull' factors are better predictors of the intention to attend an academic conference than motivational 'push' factors.*

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JEL Classification: *L83, M1, O1*

### INTRODUCTION

Tourism is indeed one of the sectors which can provide lots of revenue, for some areas or even nations. It can take many forms. It is recognized that it should be targeted in an appropriate manner (Campiranon & Arcodia, 2007). Convention tourism and the management of Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, and Exhibitions (MICE) events in general, is an area that is increasingly attracting interest from place marketers. Academics are recently reporting the attempts of certain areas to increase the inflow of tourists through this avenue, as well as the difficulties relating to co-ordination of the various interested parties in doing so (Priporas, 2005; McCartney, 2008). The offer that delegates purchase comprises of the event itself and the associated accommodation,



transport and sometimes excursions/touring before or after the event (Smith & Garnham, 2006). It is a tourism sub-sector that is growing in some economies, and is a trend identified over a decade ago (Hing, McCabe, Lewis & Leiper, 1998). In the literature there is some discussion on the need to develop the appropriate standards in the MICE events to meet the needs of participants/visitors (de Lara & Har, 2008), but very little attention on what the visitors actually want (Yoo & Chon, 2008) and how their desires affect their behaviour.

Conference tourism though has received relatively little research attention (Oppermann and Chon, 1997; Zelinsky, 1994; Zhang, Leung and Qu, 2007), despite the economic impact of conventions and conferences and their social role to promote knowledge and training. This is partially explained by the difficulty to monitor and measure the economic significance of MICE events due to differences in definitions of the meeting and convention sector and non-standardized industry data collection (Carlsen, 2005). However, research on the importance of conferences and conference tourism for professional career development is also sparse. More research studies are needed to understand the relationship between conference participation and career development, especially in the case of academic careers, where the role of conference attendance has an atypical importance. Although there is not an extensive body of literature focusing on academic careers, existing research studies argue that the academic career system has unique features in comparison with traditional career models (Baruch and Hall, 2004; Kaulisch and Enders, 2005). In addition, the dominant trends in academia today seem to change the academic profession and specify certain requirements and routes for the career development of academics. Successively, these career development requirements and routes highlight the important role of academic conferences and conference tourism for the academic staff, as well as for the academia as a whole.

The existing literature in the field of convention participation includes some models of the conference participation decision-making process (Oppermann and Chon, 1997; Zhang, Leung and Qu, 2007; Lee and Back, 2007), which provide research insights on the factors affecting conference participation behaviour. However, there are many calls for a more detailed analysis of the factors affecting participation intentions and their relative influence on intentions (Zhang, Leung and Qu, 2007, Oppermann and Chon, 1997; Lee and Back, 2007; Lee and Back 2005). Lee and Back (2005) assert that “*existing studies tend to focus on simply identifying motivational and inhibiting factors from similar association meetings, which resulted in similar findings*” and that “*extensive*

*empirical research is needed to identify motivating and prohibiting factors for different types of respondents and association meetings”* (p. 418). This study is of interest to associations that organize conventions, the policy makers and the tourism industry itself, because an individual has a wide range of choice of different conventions where participation is voluntary (Hiller 1995).

Specifically, in the case of *academic conference* participation, an analysis of the factors affecting participation intentions is still lacking. Academics may not differ from other professionals if we consider that they also go through a professional career with certain qualification requirements, certain employment and working conditions and several changing work roles. However, academic careers possess certain characteristics that differentiate them from careers in other organizations (Kaulisch and Enders, 2005). The dynamics and complexity of the academic career (Kaulisch and Enders, 2005) is mostly due to the multiple roles and functions of the academic staff, which are further transformed by the relative changes and trends in the higher education system during the last two decades (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 1998).

This paper aims to unfold the reasons that academics choose to participate to conferences. It first outlines the importance of conferences in the career of academics. The paper continues by discussing reasons that tourists visit certain locations. It then outlines the two phases of this research project, which are followed by the results of the study. Conclusions are offered, and management implications are explored and directions for future research are also suggested.

## **THE ACADEMIC PROFESSION AND CAREER: THE ROLE OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH**

Academic careers appear to be complex and dynamic (Kaulisch and Enders, 2005; McInnis, 2007). The complexity is generated from the multiple roles of academics as teachers, researchers and academic administrators (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 1998; de Janasz and Sullivan, 2004) and also from the changing conditions of the academic “job market”.

Although most of the existing literature on academic work and career focuses on the academic role of teaching, it is commonly accepted that the academic work also includes the functions of research and administration (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 1998; McInnis, 2007; de Janasz and Sullivan, 2004). The literature on teaching in higher education includes guides on teaching and also discusses some of the aspects of tutoring, supervision,

assessment, use of technology and student learning (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 1998). On the other hand, research appears to be an important academic performance indicator (Bowen, 2005) and plays a very critical role in terms of reputation, prestige and promotion (Bowen, 2005; Armstrong and Sperry, 1995). Finally, administration and management, such as deans of departments, faculties and committees, are undoubtedly another role within academic life (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 1998). Manifestly, the share of academic time between these three roles varies according to seniority and permanence of position (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 1998). However, performance in these three areas generally defines a successful career in academia (de Janasz and Sullivan, 2004).

Today, progressively universities world-wide increase their research and publication requirements for tenure (Bowen, 2005). Further, a large proportion of 'PhD-holders' cannot obtain tenure-track jobs inside the academia, which suggests the existence of growing competition and unemployment within the academic 'job market'. In this competitive academic arena, academics should possess more than good teaching skills. They must develop competencies that enhance their prestige and reputation beyond their host institution (de Janasz and Sullivan, 2004).

Academic performance can be evaluated in different ways within the academia. However, it has recently been argued that the criteria for promotion, focuses more on research and publication rather than on teaching evaluation (Forster, 2001; Richardson and McKenna, 2003). The allocation criteria for academics are connected to their performance in terms of publication, conference proceedings, research funds and activity (Kaulisch and Enders, 2005; Baruch and Hall, 2004). Academic publishing is necessary in order for research work to be peer reviewed and become available to a wider audience. Further, academic writing and publishing does not only constitute the last stage of the research process. They could be considered as an important and separate role of academics, considering that the presentation and communication of the research work to the academic community requires additional skills and efforts (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 1998). This consideration highlights the importance of academic conferences, where academics have the opportunity to present and communicate their work, seek feedback and create valuable professional networks. Bowen (2005) suggests that academics should keep a "steady stream of research flowing" (p.635) and invest money and time to attend academic conferences, even if their host institution has limited funding to support them. They "should manage their own research career and not let their academic program manage it for them" (Bowen, 2005, p.636).

The knowledge production within the academia is done within disciplines and specialties (Kaulisch and Enders, 2005) and is strongly related with the work and progress of academics all over the world (Gläser, 2001). This global nature of academia suggests that academics tend to be much more informed about the international situation, such as research studies, research methods, teaching methods, trends and innovations, within their academic field than about the situation in other academic fields within their own institution (Kaulisch and Enders, 2005). Thus, the knowledge production within the academia is based on established and “informal” networks (informal social interaction) across institutions and academics.

Networking with other faculty is important for an academic. This, in order to be informed on the innovations in his/her field and eventual involvement in research projects and professional associations (de Janasz and Sullivan, 2004). The establishment of professional networks with colleagues inside and outside the host institution helps academics to be aware of new developments and trends in their field. Without these contacts and information, their research work would stay behind national academic and/or single institution boundaries. Through networks, academics have the possibility to exchange knowledge with their colleagues. Consequently, involvement in research projects and professional associations enhances their reputation, skills and academic performance (Richardson and McKenna, 2003). The networking ability and involvement in research projects and/or obtaining resources for said projects is considered not only an asset but a necessary skill for academics today (de Janasz and Sullivan, 2004).

## **THE NEED TO ATTEND ACADEMIC CONFERENCES**

Conference tourism has an important economic impact on local and national economies. It also encompasses other sectors of the economy including hotels, retail trade, facilities providers, catering, services providers, translators and transportation, and its impact is measured by the number of jobs, personal income (salaries) and business income (profits) created (Randall and Warf, 1996). Conference organizers’ and delegates’ expenditures generate new income in the host region, which stimulates the local economy. Further, international and prestigious conferences attract international delegates and accelerate tourism activity, which is not limited to the host city. On the other hand, academic conference participation is very important for all professionals working within the academic discipline. It is necessary for academic career development,

intellectual stimulation and personal development. It also provides conference participants with a vacation opportunity and a chance for “escape”, relaxation and social interaction.

An academic conference is a type of professional conference, which “serves” the academic profession. Further, Bauman (1998) used the characterization “tourists” to describe a new cultural elite – a cosmopolitan group of intensive travellers - which consists of academics, researchers and experts (Høyer and Næss, 2001). Trips to attend conferences are part of the modern tourism industry and the considerable recorded mobility of conference attendees establishes the concept of *conference tourism* (Høyer and Næss, 2001). In turn, the term “academic conference tourism” used in this study particularly refers to academic scholarly conferences and their attendance by academics and researchers. The characteristics and operation of academic conferences are first described to provide an overall image and operation framework of these events. These characteristics highlight the unique contribution of these conferences to the career development of their delegates. The given vacation opportunity related to the attendance of academic conferences is a feature that will be separately noted. This opportunity highlights additional influencing factors for conference participation intentions of academics, which will be discussed in the next chapter of this study.

The knowledge production within academia is done within disciplines and specialties (Kaulisch and Enders, 2005) and is strongly related to the work and progress of academics world wide (Gläser, 2001). Considering the competitive academic “job-market” and the need for personal competences and career development, academics should be well informed on the international situation, such as. research studies, research methods, teaching methods, trends and innovations, within their academic discipline (Kaulisch and Enders, 2005). On the other hand, prestige and reputation are a major point of differentiation for academics and constitute an indirect indicator of academic performance (Kaulisch and Enders, 2005). Reputation relies on scholarly productivity, which in turn relies on research activity and the availability of resources for it (Latour and Woolgar, 1979). The integrated characteristics of academic conferences serve the needs of academic career development. Academic conferences are a “showcase” of recent research and communicate the scientific knowledge across the academia (Ravn, 2007, p.213). Academics stay in touch with recent research activity and teaching methods. They advance their own skills and transfer the new knowledge to their host institution. The participation in an academic conference and the publication of a paper presented in the conference proceedings and books

enriches the curriculum vitae of an academic and permits more qualifications for promotion and grants (Ravn, 2007). Therefore, academic conference attendance creates value both for the individual academic and the host institution.

## **RESEARCH FOCUS**

Understanding the factors affecting conference participation intentions is very important considering the large and growing economic activity within the conventions industry (Var, Cesario and Mauser, 1985; Lee and Back, 2005). Conference participants spend more money than leisure tourists (Zhang, Leung and Qu, 2007; Randall and Warf, 1996) and bring multi-economic benefits to the host destination (Oppermann and Chon, 1997). They are considered as opinion leaders who can give a positive image to the host destination through word-of-mouth promotion (Zhang, Leung and Qu, 2007). They are also likely to re-visit the host destination as tourists (Braun and Rungeling, 1992). Repeat visits and word of mouth promotion of the host destination increase the regional and national tourism activity (Lee and Back, 2005). Further, understanding the factors affecting conference participation helps conference organizers and associations to improve the quality of their services and therefore, maximize the number of delegates attending. A small number of attendees is “embarrassing to both the (convention) planner and the agency” (Var, Cesario and Mauser, 1985, p.197) and reduces the attractiveness of the particular convention.

There is previous research which suggested that there are certain factors that can be motivating participants to attend conventions and conferences.

- Destination stimulus, which is related to the country or the specific city of visit (Boo Hoh and Jones, 2008). Many researchers suggest that the location is a factor in choosing a convention (Oppermann and Chon, 1997; Jago and Deery, 2005; Zhang, Leung and Qu, 2007; Yoo and Chon, 2008), or even examined the role of the attraction of the city as a stand alone factor (Kang, Suh and Jo, 2005; Boo Hoh and Jones, 2008). The destination attraction includes the cultural, shopping or sightseeing opportunities (Beck and Lalopa, 2001) and participants often add a day before or after to enjoy their visit to the conference venue (Davidson, 2003). Career-oriented travel is a valuable experience of “working holiday”, which provides the travellers (conference participants) with new career

competences, “broadens their minds” and makes them multicultural (Inkson and Myers, 2003).

- Professional and social networking opportunities is often on the top of the list of the reasons that an individual may attend a conference (Ngamsom and Beck, 2000; Beck and Lalopa, 2001; Yoo and Chon, 2008). Clearly participants want to meet other participants. The participation in an academic conference is connected with a series of other benefits for the delegates. Except for the scientific-related part of the conference, the pre/post conference activities and social event provided by the organizer are very worthy to mention (Jago and Deery, 2005). These ‘get-together’ activities include lunches, dinners, and events during the conference, or before and after the formal program (Høyer and Næss, 2001).
- The association that is organising the conference as well as the perceived quality of the conference (Oppermann and Chon, 1997; Zhang, Leung and Qu, 2007).
- Educational opportunities is a factor that is perceived as very important when an individual is deciding to attend a conference (Beck and Lalopa, 2001; Yoo and Chon, 2008)
- Safety and health situation (Yoo and Chon, 2008), including the safety that conference participants will feel that they get from the physical features of the service they are consuming from the totality of the offer. Their considerations involve not only the conference venue but also the hotel, the airlines, the food and other possible services they will be getting (Jago and Deery, 2005; Hilliard and Baloglu, 2008).
- Travelability (Yoo and Chon, 2008) and the opportunity to travel (Ngamsom and Beck, 2000) are also mentioned as reasons to go to a conference. In the case of oversea conferences, delegates have the opportunity to visit a foreign destination, attend local events, “meet” a new culture and local people, sightsee and “escape” from daily routines (Høyer and Næss, 2001).
- Personal factors can also be influencing the choice of attending a conference (Oppermann and Chon, 1997; Zhang, Leung and Qu, 2007)

Some research in convention and meeting management focuses on conventions in general and not academic conferences explicitly (Boo Hoh and Jones, 2008; Yoo and Chon, 2008) and sometimes is targeting meeting planners, rather than conference attendees (Kang, Suh and Jo, 2005). Academics may not differ from other professionals if we consider

that they also go through a professional career with certain qualification requirements, certain employment and working conditions and several changing work roles. However, academic careers possess certain characteristics that differentiate them from careers in other organizations (Kaulisch and Enders, 2005). However, the need for the development of an Academic Conference Participation (ACP) Model is justified by the unique contribution of academic conferences to the career development of academics. Furthermore, there are calls from researchers in the field of convention participation for empirical testing to verify the predictive power of the proposed models (Lee and Back, 2005). In the case of academic conferences, the factors affecting participation highlight the needs and priorities of academics while engaging in this process. They highlight behaviours and routes, which are dominant and followed by the majority of academics for their career development. This reflection is absent in all the previous convention participation studies. More generally, the majority of studies in convention and meeting tourism concentrate on meeting planners and their convention site selection decisions (Zhang, Leung and Qu., 2007; Oppermann and Chon, 1997).

Both, academic conferences and academics pose different characteristics in comparison with other professional conferences and delegates. Academic conferences are a “showcase” of recent research and give academics the opportunity to communicate their scientific work across the academia (Ravn, 2007, p.213). They create value for academics, enrich their curriculum vitae and give them more qualifications for promotion and grants (Ravn, 2007). Ravn (2007) asserts that these characteristics and benefits of academic conferences are absent at other professional conferences where, typically, presenters are invited experts and delegates have only a little time for discussion and contribution. In turn, these invited experts are being remunerated to make their presentation and they benefit little professionally from this process. Further, academic conference participants have different needs and priorities while engaging in this participation process, since their participation to conferences is necessary for the career development of academics today. Consequently, academic conference participation intentions may be affected by additional factors, which are not present in existing convention participation models.

The research on general tourism has attempted to identify the drivers of choice of visitors for a long time. In the literature, one of the most well accepted reasons on influencing people to travel for pleasure revolves around the theory of “Push” and “Pull” motivation (e.g. Yuan and McDonad, 1990; Uysal and Jurowski, 1994; Oh, Uysal and Weaver,

1995; Turnbull and Usal, 1995; Baloglu and Uysal 1996; Jang and Cai, 2002; Kim and Lee, 2002; Kozak, 2002; Bogari, Crowther, and Marr 2003; Yoon and Uysal, 2005).

Klenosky (2002: 385) argues that: "*Push factors refer to the specific forces in our lives that lead to the decision to take a vacation (i.e., to travel outside of our normal daily environment*". Most Push factors are origin-related and involve socio-psychological concerns and intrinsic desires such as the need for escape, relaxation, health and fitness, adventure, prestige, and social interaction (Crompton, 1979; Iso-Ahola, 1982; Yan and McDonad, 1990; Usal and Jurowski, 1993; Fodness, 1994; Uysal and Hagan, 1994; Cha, McCleary and Uysal, 1995; Oh, Uysal and Weaver, 1995; Turnbull and Usal, 1995; Baloglu and Uysal, 1996; Hanqin and Lam, 1999; Jang and Cai, 2002; Kim and Lee, 2002; Kozak 2002; Bogari, Crowther and Marr, 2003; Bansal and Eiselt, 2004; Yoon and Uysal, 2005). On the other hand, Pull factors give hints about what external attributes draw tourists to visit particular places (Sirrakaya and McLellan, 1997; You, O'Leary, Morrison and Hong, 2000; Klenosky, 2002). They have frequently involved intangibles and other resources such as the availability of recreational facilities, historical values and destination image. They emerge as a result of the attractiveness of the selected area (Yuan and McDonald, 1990; Uysal and Hagan, 1993; Klenosky, 2002) and are characterized in terms of the features or attractions of the destination itself, such as sunshine, beaches, sports facilities, and cheap airfares (Crompton, 1979; Iso-Ahola 1982; Yan and McDonad, 1990; Usal and Jurowski, 1994; Oh, Uysal. and Weaver, 1995; Turnbull and Usal, 1995; Balogul and Uysal, 1996; Sirrakaya and McLellan, 1997; Hanqin and Lam, 1999; Jang and Cai, 2002; Kim and Lee, 2002; Klenosky, 2002; Kozak 2002; Bogar, Crowther and Marr, 2003; Yoon and Uysal, 2005).

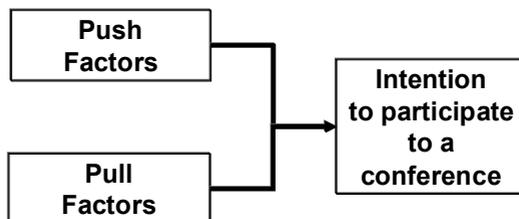
In principle, this theory relative to tourist motives, assumes that people travel and select destinations according to different 'Push' and 'Pull' variables. This is a two-step process, involving "Push" factors, which prompt someone to leave his/her home, and "Pull" factors, which draw a person to travel to a particular place.

Although the Push and Pull factors have been presented in the tourism literature over thirty years ago (Crompton, 1979; Iso-Ahola, 1982), and since then they have been established and extensively used, their suitability and the potential dimensions they might have in convention tourism in general and in conference tourism in particular have not been investigated extensively and by using many multi-item possible dimensions (Beck and Lalopa, 2001). Some of the papers

published in the area of convention and meeting management are conceptual (Davidson, 2003) and some exploratory and qualitative (Jago and Deery, 2005). Until recently, most of the published research that uses quantitative data only reported descriptive statistics (Lee and Back, 2005b). Some of the existing research only deals with the development of a scale and did not really attempt to link the components of this scale with the actual or intended behaviour participants (Beck and Lalopa, 2001; Yoo and Chon, 2008). The minority of the papers published in the area of convention and meeting management collected data from attendees (Lee and Back, 2005b). A number of the published academic papers are using data collected from participants of a specific conference or/and from members of a given preselected association (Ngamsom and Beck, 2000; Beck and Lalopa, 2001) or approached participants as they were attending a specific convention (Boo, Hoh and Jones, 2008; Hilliard and Baloglu, 2008). These participants are likely to express views influenced from the reputation of the association and the conference, as well as from any specific incidents that were taking place during the conference.

This study is designed to fill this research gap, aiming to statistically examine the influence of the proposed factors on meeting participation intentions from the perspective of academics as potential meeting academic attendees. It is suggested that organizers of academic conferences should consider unique factors which may affect the participation intentions of academics. These influencing factors may not appear between attendees of other professional conferences/conventions. Again, the consideration of these unique factors will allow conference organizers to provide academics with improved and competitive services and achieve a higher turnout in terms of participants' satisfaction and future participation.

**Figure 1.** Conference Participation Factors



Therefore, this study has two main objectives: to explore whether Push and Pull factors exist in Conference Tourism and to investigate the relevant influence of the Pull and Push factors in the choice of a scientific conference (Figure 1).

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

Since there was very limited information on the potential push and pull factors that might influence academics in their selection of a conference, a two stage approach was employed for this study. For the initial identification of the push and pull factors, the first stage of the research, long interviews were conducted (McCracken, 1988). Previous research has also attempted to identify push and pull factors in the tourism industry through unstructured interviews with visitors of a tourism attraction (Johns and Gyimóthy, 2003). In this case, the interviews were based on a topic guide with open-ended questions, but the emphasis was on the interviewee's point of view. The interviews were tape recorded, in order to have the data in its natural form (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). The twelve participants for the long interviews were recruited purposively (Miles and Heberman, 1994). A mixture of people who possessed different experiences in participating in academic conferences but who were exposed to a research-led environment were chosen to be the informants, as well as people with less exposure to a research led environment. Five academics and three PhD students from the research-led University in the UK as well as four academics from a non research-led university in the UK (New University) were the subjects of this initial study. The academics were from different academic levels and experience bases. The interviews lasted from 30 to 45 minutes each. The interviews were transcribed and the content analyzed. Two different researchers were involved in this stage, in order to validate the findings of the qualitative stage. The interviews helped in the recognition of potential push and pull factors. Furthermore, items were developed based on the information collected from the qualitative second stage and formed a good portion the item pool. Additional items were also taken from relevant literature of tourism. The totality of the generated items was then given to 3 experts, in order to secure face and content validity. The drafted questionnaire was then distributed to a convenience sample of 50 academics and PhD students for a pre-test.

The final instrument used for the quantitative data collection was a structured questionnaire with Likert-type 5-point scales (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Considering the fact that the case of

academic conferences and academics as delegates had not been researched before, appropriate measures were not available for most of the constructs. In this exploratory study nine push and ten pull factors were included. No existing construct was used in its totality to measure any of the dimensions. The items included in the final instrument are presented in the appendix. The only existing scale planned to be used was the Lee and Back (2007) scale for conference participation intention. However, the three items of the scale were so highly inter-correlated we decided to use a single item to describe the construct, since the other two did not really provided any additional information.

The last incident method was used to collect the data. Respondents were asked to answer the questionnaire having in mind the last call for papers they remembered receiving. This specific request was selected as researchers did not want to have bias towards conferences that respondents were planning to attend. To ensure a considerable number of completed questionnaires, both online survey and paper survey was used. The paper format was distributed in the three Universities based in Glasgow Scotland. In the online survey, the questionnaire was sent as an attachment to academics in various positions working in Universities across the UK. The e-mail was send through a university e-mail account. Although it is not the most common data collection method in convention and meeting management research (Lee and Back, 2005b) contacting the sample through an e-mail is a tactic that has been used when it is attempted to approach academics working in many organisations (Kang, Suh and Jo, 2005). In total 800 questionnaires to potential conference attendees in various business disciplines were distributed and 242 usable questionnaires were returned. The characteristics of the sample are detailed on table 1. Responses from potential conference participants who had never participated in a conference were eliminated from the sample.

**Table 1.** The Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Female	94	38.84%
	Male	146	60.33%
	n/a	2	0.83%
Position	PhD student	68	28.10%
	Associate Lecturer	4	1.65%
	Lecturer	32	13.22%
	Senior Lecturer	50	20.66%
	Principal Lecturer	8	3.31%
	Reader	4	1.65%
	Professor	58	23.97%
	Research Assistant	4	1.65%
	Research Associate	2	0.83%
	Research Fellow	8	3.31%
	Scientific Collaborator	2	0.83%
	Visiting Staff	2	0.83%
	TOTAL		242

## FINDINGS

The data was first cleaned. All the multi-item scales used in the study can be considered reliable since the dimensions of the measured multi items constructs had alpha reliability coefficients very close in excess of .70, or high and positive Pearson correlation (Table 2). The intercorelations of the items used in each scale with more than 2 items were also less than .45 and they were adding information in the scale. Therefore it can be argued that all items were indeed measuring the same construct. The correlations between the study variables reported on table 3, were proven in some occasions significant in a .05 level, but they were not considered to be problematic. The stronger correlation in this data set was proven to be one between a push factor (time availability) and a pull factor (previous experience), which were not considered linked on a theoretical basis.

**Table 2. Reliability of the Study Variables**

	no of items	Reliability Analysis		mean	sd
<b>PUSH FACTORS</b>					
<b>Professional Advancement Factors</b>					
Career Development	2	0.80	#	3.38	0.91
Paper Presentation and Publication	4	0.75	*	3.41	0.82
Personal Contacts	4	0.75	*	3.63	0.77
<b>Personal Factors</b>					
Escape	3	0.79	*	2.92	1.01
Interaction with Academics	2	0.40	#	2.64	0.85
Desire to learn	3	0.68	*	3.56	0.70
Time Availability	3	0.80	*	3.98	0.86
Family influence	1			2.19	1.07
Word of Mouth	3	0.85	*	3.05	1.00
<b>PULL FACTORS</b>					
<b>Locational Factors</b>					
Climate	3	0.85	*	2.18	0.94
Accommodation, Transport	3	0.88	*	3.49	1.14
Desire to Travel to the destination	1			2.86	1.20
Sightseeing & Social Events	2	0.39	#	2.73	0.95
Distance	1			3.44	1.15
<b>Academic Conference Factors</b>					
Previous Experience	3	0.81	*	3.72	0.96
Pre/Post Activities	3	0.85	*	2.48	0.90
Conference Reputation	5	0.74	*	3.59	0.79
Funding	1			3.88	1.05
<b>CONFERENCE PARTICIPATION INTEREST</b>					
	1			3.59	1.23

**Table 3. Correlation of the Study Variables**

	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
<b>PUSH FACTORS</b>																		
1. Career Development	0.62 *	0.49 *	0.00	-0.11	0.47 *	0.40 *	0.11	0.39 *	0.56 *	0.19 *	-0.01	0.07	0.06	-0.11	-0.16 *	0.29 *	-0.04	0.40 *
2. Paper Presentation and Publication		0.67 *	-0.02	0.05	0.35 *	0.33 *	-0.08	0.30 *	0.38 *	0.29 *	0.27 *	0.02	0.12	-0.05	0.10	0.40 *	0.21 *	0.43 *
3. Personal Contacts		1.00	0.16 *	0.15	0.32 *	0.39 *	0.13	0.47 *	0.39 *	0.25 *	0.31 *	-0.04	0.12	0.14	0.15	0.40 *	0.19 *	0.34 *
4. Escape			1.00	0.37 *	-0.14 #	-0.08	0.23 *	0.05	0.00	0.40 *	0.35 *	0.57 *	0.32 *	-0.24 *	0.44 *	0.09	0.35 *	-0.19 *
5. Interaction with Academics				1.00	0.04	-0.15 #	0.16 *	0.20 *	-0.05	0.27 *	0.24 *	0.29 *	0.33 *	0.06	0.46 *	0.00	0.20 *	0.15 #
6. Desire to learn					1.00	0.11	-0.12	0.14	0.27 *	-0.02	-0.14	0.09	0.22 *	-0.11	-0.08	0.28 *	-0.14	0.20 *
7. Time Availability						1.00	0.32 *	0.31 *	0.82 *	0.27 *	0.08	-0.19 *	-0.04	0.50 *	-0.35 *	0.17 *	-0.01	0.22 *
8. Family influence							1.00	0.24 *	0.33 *	0.43 *	0.14 #	0.32 *	0.21 *	0.23 *	-0.06	-0.09	0.22 *	0.14 #
9. Word of Mouth								1.00	0.31 *	0.17 *	0.23 *	0.09	0.13 #	0.16 *	0.22 *	0.25 *	0.17 *	0.20 *
<b>PULL FACTORS</b>																		
10. Previous Experience									1.00	0.37 *	0.10	0.03	0.09	0.29 *	-0.30 *	0.24 *	-0.07	0.34 *
11. Climate										1.00	0.44 *	0.55 *	0.57 *	-0.07	0.28 *	0.11	0.23 *	0.18 *
12. Accommodation, Transport											1.00	0.36 *	0.25 *	-0.02	0.32 *	0.13 #	0.51 *	-0.05
13. Desire to Travel to the destination												1.00	0.65 *	-0.39 *	0.30 *	-0.07	0.32 *	-0.02
14. Sightseeing & Social Events													1.00	-0.21 *	0.35 *	0.01	0.09	0.13 #
15. Distance														1.00	-0.31 *	-0.02	0.05	0.30 *
16. Pre/Post Activities															1.00	0.29 *	0.26 *	-0.16 *
17. Conference Reputation																1.00	-0.06	0.03
18. Funding																	1.00	-0.05
19. I will make an effort to attend this academic conference																		1.00

When the regression analysis was performed, only some of the proposed relationships were not proved to be statistically significant (Table 3), and therefore a revised model was developed, where the links among variables not statistically significant at the .05 level were deleted with stepwise regression. Both sets of results are reported. The regression analysis in the revised model showed respectable explanatory power, since the adjusted  $R^2$  was .47 (Table 3). Although the variables are inter-correlated, regression analysis can be performed in this data set, since the degree of multi-collinearity is not considered as problematic. All variance inflation factor (VIF) values are below 10, the benchmark suggested by Neter, Wesserman and Kutner (1990) and all tolerance values are greater than 0.02.

Three of the push factors were proven to be significant in the revised model. The best predictors seem to be; time availability and the probability for publication. If academics do not have time, or if they feel that their work is not going to be published to an expected extent, they are less willing to attend a conference. Some role is also played by the perception that a conference presentation might help in career development.

In total six pull factors were significant in the revised model. The most important of them is the distance of the trip. Other factors that were linked with the destination were also important. Academics want to be able to see the area and participate in social events during the conference. The difficulties they anticipate encountering during the trip were a factor that does not motivate conference selection. Surprisingly, the conference reputation has a negative link with the intention to participate. This could be due to the fact that academics prefer smaller conferences in which they can interact. They also base their intention to participate on previous experience from the same conference. The availability of funding for the conference is also a significant factor for determining participation intentions.

**Table 4.** Predictors of Conference Participation

	Full model				Revised model			
	Stand		tolerance	VIF	Stand		tolerance	VIF
	Beta	t			Beta	t		
<b>PUSH FACTORS</b>								
Career Development	0.26	3.09 *	0.31	3.24	0.21	2.83 *	0.42	2.41
Paper Presentation and Publication	0.43	4.67 *	0.27	3.67	0.50	7.09 *	0.47	2.14
Personal Contacts	0.10	1.19	0.31	3.22				
Escape	-0.18	-2.43 #	0.41	2.46				
Interaction with Academics	0.15	2.32 #	0.55	1.82				
Desire to learn	-0.14	-2.13 #	0.52	1.93				
Time Availability	-0.54	-4.87 *	0.19	5.35	-0.57	-5.73 *	0.24	4.18
Family influence	0.03	0.46	0.51	1.98				
Word of Mouth	-0.04	-0.60	0.53	1.89				
<b>PULL FACTORS</b>								
Previous Experience	0.32	2.93 *	0.19	5.17	0.38	3.80 *	0.23	4.26
Climate	0.08	1.00	0.34	2.92				
Accommodation, Transport	-0.18	-2.58 #	0.47	2.13	-0.14	-2.18 #	0.59	1.70
Desire to Travel to the destination	0.06	0.65	0.23	4.39				
Sightseeing & Social Events	0.14	1.84	0.41	2.47	0.17	3.23 *	0.85	1.18
Distance (DT1)	0.46	6.39 *	0.43	2.31	0.54	8.74 *	0.60	1.66
Pre/Post Activities	-0.09	-1.10	0.35	2.83				
Conference Reputation	-0.14	-2.21 #	0.58	1.71	-0.21	-3.95 *	0.79	1.27
Funding	-0.08	-1.19	0.50	1.99	-0.11	-1.86 #	0.65	1.53
Adjusted R2			0.48				0.47	
F			12.92				23.35	
* sing .01								
# sign. 0.05								

## DISCUSSION

The current study is an initial investigation and effort to combine convention and meetings literature and the literature on career development. It contributes to the further study of both convention participation and career development by highlighting their relationship. This reflection is absent in all the previous convention participation studies. Considering calls of previous researchers for the need of “extensive empirical research....to identify motivating and prohibiting

factors for different types of respondents and association meetings” (Lee and Back, 2005, p.418) the current study introduces an *Academic Conference Participation (ACP) Model* to identify factors affecting participation intentions of academics as potential attendees. Moreover, the study went further to statistically test the proposed model, as opposed to previous theoretical studies in the field of convention participation (Zhang, Leung and Qu, 2007; Oppermann and Chon, 1997) and to propose a refined model, which shows the relative significance of the proposed influencing factors. This effort aimed at providing the basis for further research to clarify and enrich its results. In the methodological part of the study, the use of different data collection methods also provides useful information on their advantages and disadvantages.

The results of this study can be useful for convention industry practitioners. Understanding the factors affecting conference participation helps conference organizers and associations to improve the quality of their services and maximize the number of delegates attending. Especially in the case of academic conferences, organizers should consider unique factors that may affect the participation intentions of academics. These influencing factors may not appear between attendees of other professional conferences/conventions. Considering the results of the study, the “need for career development” appears to be a facilitator in conference participation. On the other hand, “networking opportunities”, the importance of “paper presentation / publication” and opportunities of “knowledge and learning” appear as not to be expected by academics during their conference participation. This fact may indicate a negative “image” of academic conferences. In this case, conference organizers should create conferences that promote knowledge exchange, professional contacts and incorporate friendly networking activity (Ravn, 2007). Previous “personal experience” appears to play an important role for future participation. Therefore, conference organizers should carefully “build” a favourable image and reputation for their conferences.

Furthermore, three location factors are included in the anticipated model. The “image of the conference host destination”, the “sightseeing opportunities” and “accommodation / transportation cost” in the host destination influence participation intentions of potential attendees. This suggests that the development of conference tourism does not only rely on the individual efforts of conference organizers and associations. Local and national authorities and tourism organizations have a share of responsibility in attracting overseas delegates by developing a favourable host destination image and providing suitable conditions for conference and conventions in terms of facilities, such as conference centers and

convention centers transportation and accommodation. Conventions and meetings make a major contribution to the growth of local and national economies (Lee and Back, 2005). As indicated earlier, “the average conference delegate spends approximately 2.0 to 2.5 times the amount spent by recreational (leisure) tourists on a daily basis.” (Randall and Warf, 1996) and repeat visits and word of mouth promotion of the host destination promote the growth of regional and national tourism activity (Lee and Back, 2005).

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

One can not ignore that the selected domain (*academic conferences*) can be considered as restricted. Academic conferences are an individual type of professional conference and a niche market within the convention and meeting industry. Therefore, generalizing the proposed model and the results of this study to describe behaviours regarding the participation in other professional conferences would not be appropriate. In addition, different national academic systems and regulations in the academic profession may differentiate the perceptions of academics regarding conference participation. Moreover, different funding regulations for the attendance of academic conferences inside academic institutions may also play an important role in conference participation of academics.

In the methodological part of the study, the limitations are related to the selected data collection method and its aspects. In the case of the online survey, the questionnaire was sent via e-mail to the respondents. Further, the questionnaire was an attached word file and not an embedded questionnaire (in which the questions are to be found in the body of the e-mail). Bryman (2004) asserts that the embedded questionnaire requires less computer expertise, it is easier for the respondent to return to the researcher and it can achieve higher response rate in comparison with the attached questionnaire. On the other hand, in the case of the attached questionnaire, the researcher has to deal with the fact that many respondents would be not willing to open the attachment because of concerns about viruses and Internet threats (Bryman, 2004). Moreover, Bryman (2004) asserts that e-mail surveys have lower response rates in comparison with postal questionnaire surveys and “respondents may find it difficult to believe that their replies really are confidential and will be treated anonymously” (p.485). Further, the length of questionnaire (64 Likert-type scale statements) together with the multiple “mouse point-clicks” required to complete it made the participation in the research time-

consuming for the individual respondent. Alternatively, the study could have used a web survey, in which the respondents would be directed to the website of the research in which the questionnaire could be found and completed.

As indicated earlier in the presentation of the questionnaire, a highlighted note in the questionnaire introduction asks the respondent to think about the last “Call for Papers” that they received to participate in an academic conference before indicating the level of their agreement with each one of the questionnaire statements. However, the feedback from a number of respondents indicates that the last “Call for Papers” as a reference to complete the questionnaire was problematic. The bulk of “Call for Papers” received by an individual academic during a particular season makes it difficult for some respondents to think about the last one of them to guide their thinking. Further, many of the received “Call for Papers” pertain to irrelevant conferences and they are not taken into account by the recipient. Therefore, it would be more appropriate for the research questionnaire to ask the respondent to think about the last “Call for Papers” regarding a conference relevant to their field of interest.

Although the paper contributes to the introduction of an academic conference participation model, it examined mainly academics from UK universities. For model generalization purposes, further studies with respect to different academic systems characteristics must be conducted. Further, this study may be viewed as a first step in a series of studies that will hopefully lead to a more quantitative approach and generalized basis for the examination of convention participation. This paper generates calls not only for further research studies in the field of convention participation, but also for future studies to explore the importance of conferences for professional career development. Although the majority of convention research studies focuses on the economic impact of convention industry on the local and national economy, the important role of this industry in the emerging ‘knowledge society’ should not be neglected. Future research studies should explore the role of conferences and conference industry on the career development of attendees and more generally the promotion of knowledge and education.

Further, “academe is a growing sector with importance beyond its physical size” (Baruch and Hall, 2004, p.258). However, the existing literature on academic work and career is still limited. We need to further study how the academic profession changes and which are the new requirements and routes for the career development of academics. Academic careers are located both in “traditional” and “new” careers (Richardson and McKenna, 2003; Kaulisch and Enders, 2005) and their

examination provides useful insights for the majority of professional careers, both in the public and private sector. The findings of this study are preliminary and should be treated as such. Considering the limitations of the current study, future research is needed to re-examine and confirm or revise the proposed model and results. Different strategies and combination of data collection procedures can be used to achieve higher response rates thereby leading to more robust models. Many of the factors suggested by the relevant literature as influencing conference participation intentions were found to be non-influencable, when empirically tested. Further research could identify how non-influencable factors of the attendees' participation intentions could become influencable and possible additional factors affecting conference participation intentions should be identified by using both quantitative and qualitative research methods.

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## APPENDIX

### **Push Factors:**

#### **PROFESSIONAL ADVANCEMENT FACTORS**

##### **Career Development (CD)**

- *Participating in this academic conference is likely to help me advance my academic career.*
- *Presenting my research paper in this academic conference is likely to help me advance my academic career.*

##### **Paper Presentation / Publication (PPP)**

- *I am looking forward to see my work included to this conference's proceedings.*
- *It is very important for me to present my research paper in this academic conference.*
- *I am looking for feedback about my research work after my presentation*
- *Special issues of academic journals associated with this academic conference are an important parameter for me.*

##### **Professional Contacts (PC)**

- *I am likely to meet potential research partners by participating in this academic conference.*
- *I expect to strengthen my professional relationships with academic colleagues by participating in this academic conference.*
- *Participating in this academic conference is a way to support the association and its members.*
- *By participating in this conference I feel as a member of the academic community.*

#### **PERSONAL FACTORS**

##### **Escape (E)**

- *This conference's host destination is likely to be a good place for me to relax.*
- *Participating in this academic conference is a way to escape from ordinary life.*
- *A trip to this conference's host destination is likely to enhance my feeling of well-being.*

##### **Interaction with Academics (DL)**

- *I am likely to meet many participants with different interests and life styles by participating in this academic conference*

- *Participating in this academic conference gives me the opportunity to meet local academics*

**Desire to Learn (DL)**

- *I feel that I will learn the trends in my field by participating in this academic conference.*
- *I am likely to learn new skills by attending this academic conference.*
- *Participating in academic conferences keeps me up with changes in my academic field.*

**Time Availability (TA)**

- *I do not have time available to participate in this academic conference.*
- *I do have other priorities of my academic job during the period of the conference.*
- *I am busy with my university / social obligations during the period of this conference.*

**Word of Mouth Influence (WMI)**

- *Other academic and association's members have a good opinion about this conference.*
- *Other academics that previously attended this conference did have a good experience there.*
- *Other academics have a good opinion about this conference / association.*

**Pull Factors:**

**LOCATIONAL FACTORS**

**Climate ©**

- *I like the climate in this conference's host destination.*
- *Temperature in this conference's host destination is important good for me.*
- *I am very concerned about the weather in this conference's host destination.*

**Accommodation / Transportation Cost/Facilities (ATCF)**

- *I will seek information about the travelling / transportation cost of my participation in this academic conference.*
- *Before I decide to attend this academic conference I have to consider the availability of accommodation / hotel facilities in the host destination.*
- *I will try to learn about the quality and cost of accommodation in this conference host destination.*

**Destination Attraction**

- *I have a desire to travel to this conference host destination.*

**Sightseeing / Social Events Opportunities (SEO)**

- *Sightseeing in this conference host destination is good.*
- *I have a desire to attend social events in this academic conference destination.*

**Distance of Trip (DT)**

- *The distance of the trip to this conference host destination is an important issue for me.*

**ACADEMIC CONFERENCE FACTORS**

**Previous Experience (PE)**

- *I have good experiences from this association's conferences.*
- *I have good experiences from this particular conference.*
- *I have good experiences from this host destination.*

**Pre / Post Activities (PPA)**

- *I can participate in pre / post conference activities which I particularly enjoy in this academic conference.*
- *Quality of the pre / post conference activities is important for me.*
- *I will check for the pre / post conference activities before I decide to attend this academic conference.*

**Conference Reputation (CI)**

- *The identity of this conference organizer is important for me.*
- *The identity of the conference association is important for me.*
- *I seek information about the prestige of this conference.*
- *I take into account the quality of papers presented in this association's conferences.*
- *I try to learn about the host location / facilities of this academic conference.*

**Funding / Registration Cost (FRC)**

- *Availability of academic funding is an important issue for me*

**PARTICIPATION INTENTION:**

- *I will make an effort to attend this academic conference*

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