

Academic Conferences with Low Registration Fees: An Experiment and Experience

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There is no doubt that academic conferences have a lot of opportunities for scholars and academicians. Since the very early days of academia conferences have been held and it is a part of all academic disciplines because they offer a vibrant space where scholars across careers and disciplines can socialize with other fellows, exchange ideas and knowledge within the scientific community, share research findings, initiate collaboration, test ideas about any scientific matter and many more. Despite all these benefits they also present financial fences for early-career academics, research scholars and students when the cost of attending these conferences increases these days for some obvious reasons. "Many researchers are unable to attend physical conferences due to financial and logistic barriers" (Sarabipour et al., 2020) There are direct costs involved i.e. rental and decoration of the venue, refreshments, food, audio-visual, printing (brochure, souvenir), conference kit and momentous for dignitaries and scholars, travel and hospitalities of invited experts/academicians or chief guest, entertainment (i.e. hosting cultural events, banquet etc.) and so on. There are also indirect costs representing the significant employee and management time it takes to organize and hold an event. Sometimes event managers organize the conference and their fees also add to the cost. At times non-profit organizations' activities are supported by event profits and for commercial organizations it has to be a profit-making event.

Virtual or online mode of conference was seen as a ray of hope to deal with increasing expenditures and the COVID-19 pandemic has been an advantage to force the academia into virtual mode which also provided nourishment to the growth of virtual conferences. This has underlined several disadvantages associated with physical (in-person) conferences and revealed the benefits of online or virtual conferences. Virtual conferences were in an advantageous position since they are "more inclusive, more affordable, less time-consuming and more accessible worldwide, especially for early-career researchers" (Sarabipour, 2020). "The fully virtual meeting structure has enabled record attendance and geographic, socioeconomic and career stage diversity of attendees, an unprecedented level of human interactions, and exchange of scientific ideas and discussions online" (Sarabipour, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic compelled us to transition everything into the virtual realm, and as a result, we began experiencing screen fatigue and acknowledging the drawbacks of online education. Now, after almost a year of this, many are eagerly seizing any opportunity to re-establish offline connections. At the right timing, the 40th Annual Conference of the Indian Society of Professional Social Workers (ISPSW) took place at the Centre for Social Work, Panjab University, Chandigarh, from May 27th to May 28th, 2022 in a hybrid model was taken very well by the faculties and research scholars. Around a hundred research scholars from different disciplines registered and presented their papers; it was a unique ISPSW annual conference. Participation from the faculties from other disciplines was also very encouraging which was different than earlier conferences. This could be because of sincere efforts by the Centre for Social Work, Panjab University, Chandigarh. A debate ensued regarding whether, in the post-COVID era, research conferences should predominantly adopt virtual formats. It's worth noting that while virtual conferences offer certain advantages, they cannot replicate the

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authentic in-person interactions and immersive learning experiences typically associated with physical conferences. While face-to-face interactions and networking opportunities are undoubtedly valuable, a hybrid model that combines virtual and in-person elements may strike the right balance, offering the best of both worlds in the post-COVID research conference landscape.

In difficult circumstances, the 40th Annual Conference of the ISPSW was conducted in just 23 days in a tight time line. It was planned to be conducted at ABVIMS and RMLH New Delhi but due to the abrupt cancellation and uncertainty about the conference. Initially, it was almost impossible to think that the conference would be possible; there were no financial resources and even men power but somehow with the very active support of Dr. Gaurav Gaur the Chairperson of Centre for Social Work, Panjab University, Chandigarh and his student conference had a grand success with 230 registered delegates and 110 abstracts of submission.

The registration fee was kept very low so that many students and research scholars could participate. Lower registration fees make the event more accessible to a broader range of participants, ensuring a diverse and inclusive gathering of professionals and experts from various backgrounds. The major expenditures on a conference often revolve around food, banquets, and conference kits. So, Costs associated with food, banquets, and elaborate conference kits can indeed be reduced by opting for a more minimalist approach. Which was followed available option for food on the university campus was utilized effectively and managed successfully which satisfied the majority.

Cost-effective conference kits were prepared with sustainable materials and sourced from various sections of the society. Handmade cloth bags were sourced from an NGO where underprivileged women stitch these bags and can earn their livelihood while creating sustainable alternatives. The pencils used in conference kits were specially sourced from Gujarat. These pencils are made from waste newspapers and are another example of sustainable options in today's world. The open-hand memento presented to dignitaries was sourced from the shop which houses products made by inmates of the Model Jail, Burail, Chandigarh. Besides these, the souvenir given to academic session chairs was prepared out of a photograph of Gandhi Bhawan, Panjab University, clicked by Dr. Gaurav Gaur.

The majority of participants found the overall experience highly satisfying. Organizing an academic conference with low registration fees, in an exceptionally short timeframe, and efficiently managing resources was a successful experiment. This achievement has the potential to serve as a replicable model in academia.

References

XL Annual National Conference of ISPSW. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://pswjournal.org/index.php/ANC/issue/view/42>

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