The Inaccessibility of 'International' Conferences: Hidden Inequalities in the Academic Profession (0260)

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Conferences hold an ambivalent status in the academic profession. Although conference participation is not valued to the same extent as research funding and publications, conferences do feature in promotion criteria (see Appendix 1), as a proxy indicator for harder-to-measure qualities such as 'esteem'. Furthermore, conferences are known to have indirect benefits, such as reputation building, and the development of research and publication collaborations (de Vries and Pieters, 2007; Kyvik and Larsen, 1994; Miko et al., 2015). As such, access to conferences is associated with access within the academic profession. However conferences are exclusionary in many ways, and for many academics so-called 'international' conferences are inaccessible. The issue of access to conferences falls between different actors in terms of policy implications, as this grey area of academic practice is not strictly an institutional issue, but neither do conference organisers bear the full responsibility for ensuring access. Because attending conferences is seen as somewhat optional, the responsibility falls to individual academics. This paper draws on the research project 'In Two Places at Once: the Impact of Caring Responsibilities on Academics' Conference Participation', and examines the intersecting inequalities which result in conferences being more accessible for some academics than others. The paper ultimately asks the question: who is responsible for facilitating access to conferences?

While conferences are an under-researched area in higher education studies (Henderson, 2015), there is substantial if disparate evidence from other fields on the exclusionary nature of conferences. For academics who already experience exclusions within higher education institutions, such as working class academics, conferences can represent an ultra-elite space (Stanley, 1995). Inequalities associated with ethnicity and race can play out at conferences (Ahmed, 2012). Conferences are sites of chronic gender inequality, where women opt for shorter presentation slots (Jones, 2014), and are given token roles such as chair rather than keynote speaker (Eden, 2016). Conferences are also exclusionary for disabled academics (Hodge, 2014). For academics with caring responsibilities, conferences present numerous barriers related to access and participation (Henderson, Cao and Mansuy, 2018; Hook, 2016; Ward and Wolf-Wendel, 2012). Access to conference funding, opportunities and leave is also highly unequal, as shown by Sabharwal (2018) in relation to caste and gender in India. As this paper argues, all of these different inequalities intersect and furthermore are exacerbated by international conference travel, which is a recognised challenge in its own right (Derudder and Liu, 2016; Dubrow et al., 2015).

This paper draws on data from a study of the impact of caring responsibilities on academics' conference participation. The study used the diary-interview method, where 20 self-identified academics with caring responsibilities (Henderson, Cao and Mansuy, 2018) completed a time log for one conference attended, on which they

noted their preparation and catch-up tasks as well as interactions with caring responsibilities and/or co-carers while at the conference (Henderson, forthcoming). The time-log then provided the foundation for an in-depth interview. This paper addresses the third research question from this study: 'Do factors and strategies [relating to care and academia] differ in relation to international travel for the purpose of attending conferences?'. This question is particularly salient given the importance of international conferences for academic career development (see appendix 1). The data analysed in this paper is from the interview question where participants were asked to reflect on their conference in relation to international conference travel. Data werr analysed using two analytical processes. Firstly, discourse analysis was used to identify the ways in which participants discursively constructed international travel as a barrier (or not) to conference attendance. Secondly, an intersectional framework was used to analyse how caring responsibilities intersected with other characteristics, to produce a more complex picture of access to international conferences.

Discursive constructions of distance
There were some clear factors of attending international conferences. Long-distance travel necessitated a longer time away, and involved communication issues associated with being in different time zones. The data particularly showed that distance is a relative concept, which is determined both by logistical factors as well as personal perceptions of distance. For many participants in this study, the question, 'Can I get back if something happens?' was the key determiner of conference attendance. Participants verbally drew maps as to where they would consider attending a conference. Several participants felt that international conference travel was impossible at that stage of their lives; for example one UK-based participant stated anything beyond three hours' journey away would be impossible; she compared Manchester with Japan as equally impossible. Other Europe-based participants noted that a conference in another European city was at times easier to access than conferences in remote parts of their country of residence. Discursive constructions of distance were also layered with a psychological barrier, where, in the words of one participant, international conference travel 'feel[s]...like you're making this big statement'.

Intersecting inequalities of access
Caring responsibilities intersected with other factors to enable or constrain academics' conference mobility; these issues were intensified in international travel. For doctoral students or early career researchers, there was less institutional support for attending conferences, and they also had fewer personal financial resources to draw on. This was more marked still for the two sole parents who participated in the study. Conferences were also more challenging for migrant academics, whose support networks were located elsewhere. There were two cases in the study of participants' family members engaging in international travel to assist with care during the conference. Faith emerged as another issue, where a Jewish participant who could not travel on a Saturday had to factor in an extra day away from home (and the associated expense) when deciding whether to attend a conference.

Currently there is some sharing of responsibility for access to conferences between conference organisers and HEIs, but currently the responsibility often falls to the individual academic. Where conference organisers do implement policy decisions to facilitate access, they often target particular groups, such as Global South attendees,

students, and parents with young (able-bodied) children. Some support exists in HEIs, but conference funding tends to be managed at departmental level and is vulnerable to the specific priorities of the head of department. To further complicate the picture, an intersectional analysis asks how conference organisers and HEIs can better support multiply disadvantaged academics in accessing conferences.

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Appendix 1: Conferences in HEI Promotion Criteria

HEI	Role	Quotation	Source
Herriot Watt University	Associate Professor/ Senior Research Fellow	"Role holders are likely to hold positions of responsibility in e.g. learned societies, professional institutions, editorial boards, organising committees of international conferences, research councils and government bodies, etc."	https://www.hw.ac.uk/services/docs/CriteriaAcadStaff-final.pdf
Herriot Watt University	Professor/ Professorial Fellow	"Role holders will hold leading positions of responsibility in e.g. learned societies, professional institutions, editorial boards, organising committees of international conferences, research councils and government bodies, etc."	https://www.hw.ac.uk/services/docs/CriteriaAcadStaff-final.pdf
Lancaster University	Applicable across roles	"published work in appropriate outlets (e.g. leading journals/conference proceedings/books)"	www.lancaster.ac.uk/hr/total-reward/files/APC_14_15.pdf
Northumbria University	Professor	"Recognised as an authority within and beyond the University (e.g. high-profile outputs, which may include conference papers..."; "High standard in the field (evidence might include: invitations to present at international conferences...)"	https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/static/5007/hrpdf/ap_prof_lt.pdf
Oxford Brookes University	Principal Lecturer	"Reputation as an excellent teacher and academic leader e.g. Brookes Teaching Fellowship Excellence and Innovation Award, Student Led Teaching Award, advising for other universities, external examining, external validation panel member, invited workshops/course, consultancy, guest speaker invitations, organisation of conferences, seminars and workshops on topics related to the student experience, contribution to policy, procedures or practice for sector bodies or university committees."	https://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/hr/reward/academic/promotions/pl_student_exp.html
Queen's University Belfast	Senior Lecturer	"Editorship of significant research volumes or conference proceedings"; "Refereed national and international conference contributions"; "Record of organising a successful major conference"; "Presentations at conferences, workshops and other fora"	https://www.qub.ac.uk/.../AcademicPromotions/AcademicProfilesforAcademicPromoti...
University of Glasgow	Assistant Professor	"Presentations at HEI/National/International conferences"	https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_403203_en.pdf
University of Newcastle	Senior Lecturer	"Regular invitations to conferences and seminars to present research papers"; "Successful dissemination and uptake by others of curriculum development/innovation through, for example, conference presentations, workshops, publications, web sites."	https://www.ncl.ac.uk/hr/assets/documents/2016-criteria-senior-lecturer.pdf
University of Nottingham	Associate Professor/ Principal Research Fellow	"A record of invited talks at international conferences/events and UK Higher Education Institutions"; "Contribution to the wider community via publication and dissemination of teaching related scholarship through text books; participation in conferences"	https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/.../promotionandregrading/promotion/.../appendix-1-le...
University of Sheffield	Personal Chair (Professor)	"Delivery of plenary and key note addresses at esteemed international conferences."	https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/hr/thedeal/promotion/recriteria