

Teaching Professionals' Opinions and Views on Experiences of Attending Academic Conferences

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Abstract

The academic conferences are the right place to meet the researchers working in the same area. This is the right place to learn how to present a research work to an audience who can help them by giving comments and asking questions. This research aimed 1) to investigate teaching professionals' perspectives about effectiveness of attending conferences on professional development and 2) to examine post-conference feelings for Myanmar university teachers who attend international conferences. In the recent study, a total of 266 teaching professionals' opinions about the impact of conferences on their professional development were investigated. Instruments of this research used to collect the data consisted of questionnaires and interviews. The descriptive statistics used to analyze the data was percentage. The results of this study revealed that the majority of the participating professionals developed positive feelings after

attending conferences. Overall, the evidence presented here was positive, highlighting a range of benefits that delegates report as a result of conferences. As for the post-conference feelings and the activities the participants are involved, more than half of the participants feel 'confident' as they return home relatively with more knowledgeable after conferences. The majority of the respondents stated that they feel motivated to go to conferences and feel more confident.

Keywords: Teaching professionals, Opinions and views, Experiences of attending conferences

Introduction

A major activity in the life of an academic is the professional conference. A conference is not just an avenue for scientists to present their research to the wider community, but it can be an important venue for brainstorming, networking, and making vital connections that can lead to new initiatives, papers, and funding, in a way that virtual, online meetings cannot. This is why conferences matter. Numerous profession-based events are held every year at both national and international levels, offering teachers and other professionals opportunities to learn, share and network – providing of course there is the appropriate institutional support for teachers to attend these. A recent study by Borg (2014) shows several perceived benefits for professionals who attend international conferences, principally: there is clear overlap between these advantages for professional development. These include in particular the potential for conference attendees to meet other professionals, and thus be exposed to and exchange new ideas.

The importance of conferences and participating in them in the visibility, consolidation and expectations is undeniable both at the professional, institutional, and personal levels. Conferences provide an opportunity for networking with peers who can answer questions. Borg (2014) suggested that conferences can show different techniques, teach problem-solving, and provide an opportunity to exchange ideas. Feelings of isolation can also be reduced by going to conferences. Conferences serve as a platform

for researchers and presenters to share their findings and experiences from their areas of interest. There has been some research on the significance of participating in conferences in different forms and the functioning (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2012).

Literature Review

Conferences are very helpful to all teachers. According to Borg & Alshumaimeri (2012). They help every teacher learn more about their profession so that they can be more effective. The followings are advantages for the teachers who attend the conferences to share knowledge and improve their understanding of recent trends in their teaching on the selection and implication of conference themes (Harrison, 2010). Academic Conferences will also assist the teaching and learning more effective because all the students will have and ease any issues in the classroom will no longer become distractions to students.

1. Getting feedback on an early version of one's latest work

Presenting at a conference can be nerve-wracking, and participants might be tempted to fall back on the same presentation that they always give because they know that it's safe. But if they do this, they will be missing out on one great benefit of conferences: the chance to get feedback from experts on early versions of their work. Participating professionals can use their presentation time to talk about preliminary results from their most recent experiment, and the feedback they get from their audience can help them to anticipate reviewers' comments when they try to get it published. Alternatively, they could present their well-established work, and then at the end, they could throw out some ideas they have for future experiments and get feedback on these. A conference presents the chance to see a whole room full of world experts in their particular field, so there is no better chance to get their work in front of these people and have them candidly discuss its strengths and weaknesses.

2. Getting to know other people in the field

One of the biggest benefits of attending a conference is getting to know other people in their field. They have talked before about how conferences are a key opportunity for networking. Networking is very important for job hunting, obviously, but having a big network benefits them in other ways too. Maybe participating professionals will need advice from an expert in another field, or they will want to ask someone to come and give a talk at their institution, and this is easier when they have a network to reach out to. It is also helpful to have support from people who are at a similar stage in their careers to them and can empathize with the problems and struggles which they go through at work.

3. Hearing about the latest research

If participants want to know about the very latest findings in their field before they are even published in journals, then a conference is the place to be. Many researchers will present preliminary findings or work which has not yet been published at a conference. Of course, they should not take every claim they hear at a conference to be accurate until they are able to look through the methodology and findings for themselves, but this is a great chance to get a peek of what other people are working on. These ideas can be great inspiration for their own research.

4. Improving one's presentation and communication skills

Soft skills are important for every career and in academia or research, then the skills in presentation and communication are particularly important. Fortunately, conferences give participants the chance to practice these skills. Rehearsing for giving a talk or poster presentation will make them more comfortable in front of an audience, and participants will learn things like the speed at which they should talk and the amount of detail which they need to give in their explanations. Answering questions after the presentation and chatting with other attendees will help them on communications skills.

5. Visiting a new place and have fun

Finally, it should not be overlooked that attending a conference is good fun. Although a conference is unequivocally a work event more than a leisure one, it can still be enjoyable. Travelling to a new place is a big part of the appeal of a conference, meaning that participants get to see a different city, eat new food, and see some local landmarks or tourist attractions. They might even try out learning a little bit of a new language. They will also have the chance to attend social functions as part of a conference, such as dinners, trips, or parties. Sometimes these events can be formal or dull, but very often they are relaxed, friendly affairs. With the opportunity to meet other academics with similar interests to them, they can enjoy the company of others and they might even make some good friends.

6. Meeting the academic heroes

If there is a participating professional whose work attendees admire, it can be both inspiring and educational to meet them and to talk to them directly. If one of their academic heroes is speaking at a conference, this could be their perfect chance for them to meet those academic heroes.

7. Engaging in high-level debates and refine one's ideas

There are few things better for developing ideas of professionals that participating in a well-spirited debate. Listening to and participating in lively discussions at conferences can give them new ideas, help refine their existing concepts, and maybe even change their mind about some key issues in the field. In a conference setting, one should always retain a certain level of humility and be receptive to.

8. Adding to CV

Attending a conference is definitely something that should go on CV, especially if participating professionals have given a talk or poster presentation. It shows potential employers or grant-awarding bodies that

they are engaged with their field and are taking an active part in communicating with other academics. If they have done it, flaunt it.

Research Objectives

In this study, this paper aims to explore the Myanmar university teachers' opinions and views on experiences of attending academic conferences. The objectives are:

1. To investigate teaching professionals' perspectives about effectiveness of attending conferences on professional development, and
2. To examine post-conference feelings for university teachers who attend international conferences.

Methodology

1. Research Design

In the recent study, a total of 266 teaching professionals' opinions about the impact of conferences on their professional development were investigated.

2. Instruments and Procedures

The study covered a sample of 266 university teachers who attended international conferences. The data were collected through questionnaires and interviews both in paper and online. Categorical data were also presented as frequencies and percentages in tables to be simplified large amounts of data.

3. Data Collection and Data Analysis

Academic conferences, an integral part of the scientific community, are a platform for researchers to share their most recent findings with their peers and to reinforce a healthy discussion between researches from various backgrounds and fields of study. There are many obvious reasons for attending conferences. In this study, teaching professionals' opinions and views on experiences of attending academic conferences were investigated by using a quantitative approach.

Results

Table 1

Questionnaire Responses of the Teaching Professionals on the Main Reasons Teachers Attending Conferences (n=266)

Sr No	Main reasons	Responses			Feeling	
		Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Positive	Negative
1	Through attending conferences teachers can update their knowledge on the latest research.	81%	17%	2%	94%	6%
2	Through attending conferences teachers can learn new techniques and methods utilized in the field.	83%	14%	3%	91%	9%
3	Through attending conferences teachers can familiarize themselves with the most recently released teaching materials.	55%	26%	18%	79%	21%
4	Through attending conferences teachers can establish professional networks in local and international arena.	72%	18%	10%	87%	13%
	Avg	72.75 %	18.75 %	8.5%	87.75%	12.25%

According to the data, there is no doubt about publication when participants attended a conference. Conference proceedings are always a good way to have the research published and indexed. They also have the opportunity to publish other research in one of the journals. 83% of the teachers agree that they will hear new techniques, new types of equipment, unpublished data, or learn from thought-leaders that attendees may not have known previously. Moreover, participants will meet new researchers,

build relationships, make friends, network collaborations, learn new culture, able to upgrade their work and try to help students. At a conference, 72% of the participants agree that they will be able to work together with professionals from different backgrounds and fields of study. When they build their professional network, conferences can become the best place to connect with professionals in their field. By attending conferences, 81% of respondents accept that teachers are able to update the most recent information on their newest and latest research. Because presenting a paper, one of the main objectives of an academic conference participant, is the chance for the researcher to present a paper in front of colleagues of the same or similar fields of study and be able to receive positive feedback and constructive criticism about their research. Exchanging ideas on fields of interests is to seed the links for future collaborations around the world.

Table 2

Responses of the Teaching Professionals on the Opportunities of Conferences Provide to Teachers Attending Conferences (n=266)

Sr No	Opportunities of Conferences	Responses			Feeling	
		Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Feeling confident	Feeling isolation
1	Conferences can show different techniques.	75%	15%	10%	84%	16%
2	Conferences can teach problem-solving.	84%	15%	1%	81%	19%
3	Conferences can provide an opportunity to exchange ideas.	90%	6%	4%	82%	18%
	Avg	83%	12%	5%	82%	18%

In the study, 90% of participants show that conference is a place where not only may conference attendance learn things from different subject areas of study, but they also have many sessions for professional development and career advice. Chances are, wherever they come from many different sub-fields of study if they go to a conference a single broad topic makes

the attendees unite, and many projects will be multidisciplinary. They agree that teachers will be able to solve their problems concerned with teaching subjects and conducting researches after attending conferences (84%). Therefore, the university teachers get more confident when they work on-going processes on their newest study using new different methods and strategies.

Table 3

Questionnaire Responses of the Participants' Opinion on the Effectiveness of Attending the International Conferences (n=266) (Source: Harrison, 2010)

Sr No	Effectiveness of attending the international conferences	Responses		
		Agree	Not Sure	Disagree
1	Get feedback on an early version of one's latest work	60%	31%	9%
2	Get to know other people in the field	67%	28%	5%
3	Hear about the latest research	81%	12%	7%
4	Improve one's presentation and communication skills	90%	8%	2%
5	Visit a new place and have fun	76%	4%	20%
6	Meet the academic heroes	77%	20%	3%
7	Engage in high-level debates and refine one's ideas	79%	12%	9%
8	Adding to CV	80%	16%	4%
	Avg	76.3%	16.4%	7.3%

Only 60% of the participants agree that at a conference, participants have the opportunity to get feedback on their work from other researchers and may provide new perspective. Conferences are also a good way for people to meet someone at a meal, in the exhibit hall or wherever and within a few minutes, they can communicate with someone that could dramatically affect their professional career. Among the participants, 67% of them think that this is especially important for looking for collaborators, jobs' ideas, or committee members in some fields. Conferences make them become successful professionals in their fields and famous speakers among researchers and then get a chance to reduce their work stress. However,

77% of the participants agree that they will not only meet academic heroes in their field, but also some of the newest people. Conferences give them the opportunity to discuss these people face to face about their on-going process, and 58% think that they will receive some advice on how to elevate their own program. The greatest benefits of attending an international or professional conference are the opportunities to build the network and increase awareness of new trends happening in the area of interest. Some of the presenters shared cutting-edge research on entrepreneurship, marketing, organizational development, technology, commerce, and leadership. These research topics allowed learning about all of the new things that are developing in other countries while expanding current knowledge within the area of expertise.

Table 4

Interview Responses of the Teaching Professionals on the Post-Conference Feelings for Professionals Attending International Conferences (n=266)
(Source: Harrison, 2010)

Sr No	Perceived benefits for professionals who attend international conferences	Post-conference feelings		
		Feeling motivated	Feeling more confident	Feeling isolation
1	Conference attendees can meet other professionals.	69%	21%	10%
2	Conference attendees can be exposed to innovative ideas.	52%	40%	8%
3	Conference attendees can exchange new ideas.	31%	62%	7%
	Avg	51%	41%	8%

According to the interview responses, most of participants feel motivated by engaging with researchers from different geographical areas and same fields after attending conferences. Presenting the research, one of the obvious benefits for attending conferences is good practice in talking about what participants do with a variety of people from similar, related and completely different areas of study. 62% of participants get more confident about their work because attending conferences encourages them upgrade

professional development skills and gives them new perspective about their work on how to conduct their project differently.

Attending conferences, especially the international ones, gives the chance to listen to different opinions and trends in the field, provide with new techniques, new types of equipment, new data and new investigators. Conferences are highly exclusionary spaces for learning, knowledge production and dissemination, career development, and the formation of collaborations and partnerships for publications and research projects, sites where jobs are directly and indirectly advertised and secured, and sites of friendship, mentoring and all kinds of relationships. Furthermore, attending, organizing and being invited to speak at conferences are also expectations which are included in many promotions criteria and also in some hiring criteria (particularly for early career scholars who may not yet have a publication record). The role of conferences is often downplayed in practice and in research; amassing research and evidence on the impact of conferences on careers has resulted in a clear and irrefutable conclusion: missing out on conferences disadvantages academics in multiple regards.

The following figure demonstrates the teachers' opinion on the academic conference.

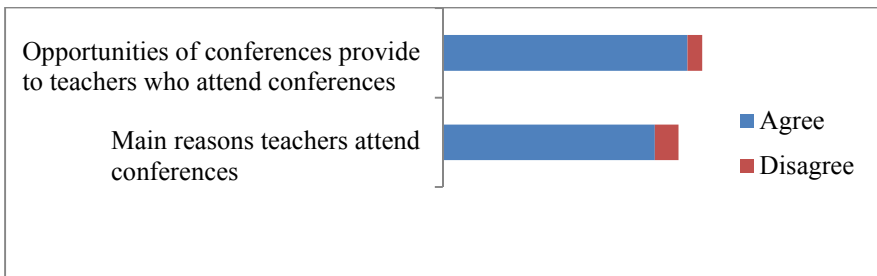


Figure 1. Teachers' opinions towards experiences of attending academic conferences.

According to responses, teachers can build networks with academic heroes and experts in the same or similar field of studies all around the world and to exchange opinions and ideas on recent advances and technological breakthroughs by attending an academic conference. In addition to expanding the knowledge that one has and upgrading performance in accomplishing institutional objectives, teachers believe that conferences bring together people who share a common discipline from different parts of the world, bringing different forms of ideas which build into something greater. Meeting new people with different cultures and dispositions enlightens the way of participants' thinking in field of study.

From figure 1 indicates that most of the participants agree on the benefit of attending the conference.

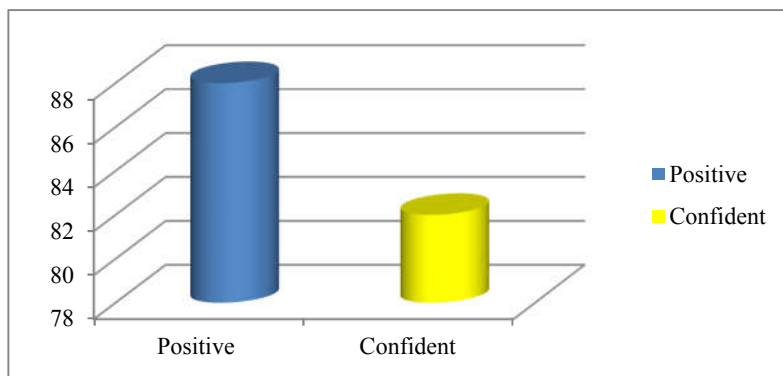


Figure 2. Teachers' feelings on attending conferences.

Attending academic conference is the best way for teachers to reduce stress from responsibilities at the university and discover different cities of the world. And socializing new people with different cultures and dispositions make teachers sharpen cognitive skills in field of study and change their attitudes into positive. In this study, teachers assume that participating in conferences make them a positive contribution to professional development. Therefore, participants get motivation to conduct new research and present their findings among other researchers. It is vital to find out what's new in their field of study to survive in an

academic discipline. Academic conferences will keep them updated on new findings that have taken place. This is in fact one of the major reasons why one should attend an academic conference. When one attends an academic conference he or she is sure to meet people of his or her same stature, mindset and goals. This is a motivational factor as one aspires to overcome fears and achieve one's dreams.

For students and researchers, academic conferences help to make research on a particular subject easier. They provide access to various research activities related to a particular subject with current findings and developments anticipated from them.

From the figure 2 indicates that most of the participants have positive feelings on attending conference. Some of them agree that attending the conference can build them more confidence.

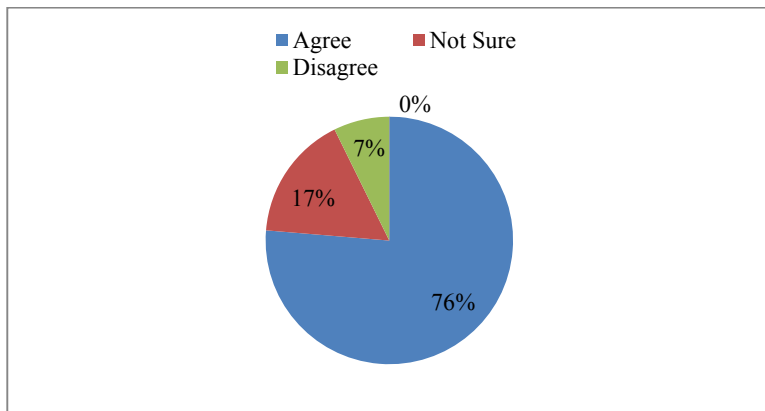


Figure 3. Teaching professionals' opinions on effectiveness of attending international conferences.

Networking is all about starting and building relationships, getting to know people, and trying to help other people. And, for a lot of people, knowing how best to do that at a conference or meeting is a learned skill. Participants agree that they can connect with new people in local and

international to learning new culture, techniques and information, sharing ideas and discussing previous findings to build the better ones. Moreover, most of teachers agree that they can practice to improve their presentation and they can establish their names in their field when they are invited as a speaker. Thus, teachers who attended international conferences get more effectiveness than people who didn't participate.

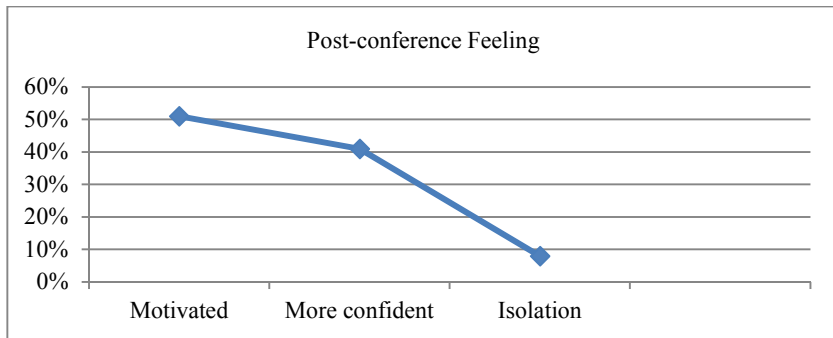


Figure 4. Post-conference feelings for professionals attending international conferences.

According to the figure, most of participants feel motivated after attending conferences because they can network with experts in different backgrounds and same fields and to build increase awareness of new trends happening in the field of interest. Presenters get more confident about their work because attending conferences encourages them upgrade professional development skills and gives them new perspective about their work on how to conduct their project differently. Finally, of course, conferences provide great opportunities to learn about the latest research in the field. Some conferences include workshops that teach valuable field-specific or more general skills (like science communication, applying for academic and non-academic jobs, getting papers published, etc.). Paying attention to the talks and posters that win prizes can help with making prize-winning presentations in the future.

Discussion

The present study has aimed to explore opinions of Myanmar university teachers on experiences of attending academic conferences. The findings confirmed that the main reasons to attend academic conferences are to get together to share new techniques and methods utilized in the field, interact and to discuss matters of professional interest. The results of this study showed similar outcomes compared with Borg (2015) and Malupa-Kim (2011) in the field. Their studies showed in a similar way that teachers get different techniques, learn problem-solving skills and find lots of opportunities to exchange ideas from conferences. Furthermore, this study showed that teaching professionals feel more confident to conducting recent researches and positive attitudes towards networking with other people in similar or same field and various backgrounds in related fields. Therefore, attending conferences is commonly the greatest way to create opportunities of mutual benefit, knowledge development and forms the main motivation for networking, conducting newest work and presenting their own findings. The researchers will be able to study about the future research trends from the invited talks and presentation. Therefore, disseminating and sharing work, discussing research with colleagues and getting feedback on presented on work make an active contribution that can impact not only on communication of subject information, but also on needs of individual presenters, their employing institutions, and those that fund their work.

Recommendations

For any student or researcher, there are many benefits to attending an academic conference such as sharing research, learning about new topics, and meeting fellow researchers. So, it is important to do some research when planning to attend a conference. Conferences are not only about speeches and lectures. Of course, these are important. However, there are many other benefits of attending a conference. The participants can argue that reading a scientific journal can provide them with most of these, but an insight that comes directly from the researcher may just have additional findings and notes that may have not been in their publications.

1. Networking

Academic conferences help attendees network and meet researchers and scholars not only from the same field of study, but also those from related fields. This gives them a broader perspective on their work, and they will be able to see how the different areas interconnect to bring about a substantial finding. Meeting new people also means that they make new business connections, and these may prove quite beneficial when they have a new research project sometime in the future.

2. Learning

One of the other main reasons for organizing such academic conventions is the learning factor tied to it. Just by attending them, participants get first-hand insight into certain industries and areas of study. Interestingly, much of the time, they have revolutionary moments at such conferences where they realize that a certain technique or process used in another field of study as common practices, may become the next novel breakthrough in theirs. Besides those moments of epiphany, they may also learn new things related to better safety management and laboratory processes.

3. Hone Skills

One of the main skills that participants will get to put into practice at an academic conference is the ability to present their findings with self-confidence and a developing a personal touch to the way they connect with the audience. By presenting at an academic conference, attendees are also gradually getting better at presenting research in “layman’s” terms, especially for those who are not quite familiar with field of research. When attendees listen to someone presenting their research, there are quite a few benefits as well. They may just pick up a few new skills and processes that they can incorporate into daily laboratory processes and optimize overall functions at the workplace.

4. Staying Updated

The best thing about academic conferences is that teachers are always ahead of the game. Since the main function of such convention of minds are all about sharing new findings, researchers would be the first to know what's happening and which advances are occurring across all fields that are of interest to them. Teaching professionals would also be up to speed on any possible technological advances, especially in terms of artificial intelligence and robotics and how they may play a part in their field of study. Besides that, they would also get first hand access to the most updated basics at a laboratory, which are the standard procedures, laboratory management and ethics as well as the latest safety measures.

To sum up, thousands of professionals attend conferences around the world each year and such activity is assumed to make a positive contribution to these individuals' professional development and work. Evidence of what exactly those benefits is, though, scarce, and this article reports a study seeking to identify, from delegates' own perspectives, the impact that attending conferences has. Overall, the evidence presented here is positive, highlighting a range of benefits that delegates report as a result of conferences. Ways in which the impact of attending conferences can be even further enhanced are also identified and discussed in this research article.

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