UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY SYDNEY

Examining attendance and non-attendance at association conferences: a grounded theory approach

by Rui Wang

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University of Technology Sydney
Business School

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Certificate of Original Authorship

I, *Rui Wang* declare that this thesis, is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of *Doctor of Philosophy*, in the *Business School* at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

For academics, attending association conferences is a crucial activity in the course of their career trajectory. Researchers have noted increasing concerns over delegate's absences and question whether the merits of conferences, mentioned above, are effectively reduced as a result. Previous literature has not provided a robust analysis regarding delegate attendance and non-attendance at conferences and there is little evidence of connections between empirical studies and the theories behind the phenomenon.

Following the guidelines of Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory, unstructured interviews were conducted with 15 PhD students and 22 academic staff across STM (Science, Technology, and Medical), ESS (Education and Social Sciences), and BUS (Economics and Management) disciplines from four Australian universities. It was found that delegates are motivated by external factors (including support from the institution, conference reputation) and inherent needs (including learning and networking opportunities, visibility improvement, career advancement, and conference destination exploration) to attend the association conference. Their reasons for not fully participating in the conference program were varied, and included: lack of interest in the topics, competing priorities, conference fatigue, feelings of exclusion, and the influence of others including accompanying partners and peers.

It is clear from the results that the ultimate purpose of those attending conferences is to obtain resources, which is clearly proven by social capital theory. Research data revealed there were circumstances under which interviewees fully attended a conference, others where they selectively participated in some sessions, and some which saw them not participate in any sessions or social events at all. These anomalies in patterns of attendance were influenced by their unique needs and circumstances. They had different degrees of freedom of choice (or passive choice) of social capital brought by the attendance, which naturally causes them to show varying degrees of involvement during the conference. In this sense, the emergent theories (social capital and involvement theory) provide theoretical lens to examine delegates' attendance and non-attendance during the conference.

From a theoretical perspective, this study advances the event management literature by establishing a new conceptual model to capture event attendee's conference experience. From a practical perspective, this study provides guidance for multiple conference stakeholders. Participants will benefit from better conference design. Greater understanding of participant

needs will also enable meeting planners, conference organisers, convention bureau managers and others create and market conference programs more likely to attract participants and maximise attendance at their events.

1. Introduction

For academics, attendance at association conferences (hereafter referred to as conferences) is an ongoing and important aspect of their career trajectory (Martin, Holland, & Witiw, 2015; Oester, Cigliano, Hind-Ozan, & Parsons, 2017). The extant literature underlines the importance of attendance at a conference, including the enhancement of visibility, knowledge aggregation and sharing, professional development, learning about cutting-edge trends, improving opportunities to have research published in top-rated journals, agenda setting with potential collaborators, and the development of one's academic reputation (Eckmann, Rocha, & Wainer, 2012; Edwards, Foley, & Malone, 2017; González - Santos & Dimond, 2015; Hansen, 2018, 2018 ; Harrison, 2010).

It is well established that conferences can result in significant outcomes for stakeholders, including individual academics, their supporting institutions and professional associations. These impacts rely on delegate attendance, the knowledge they share, the inspiration they gain from each other, and the relationships they form. When delegates fail to participate in parts of a conference, it is worth questioning whether the opportunities are being leveraged to their full capacity. However, little is known about this issue and the practice of skipping (non-attendance) parts of the conference. Anecdotally, most delegates have stories about their non-attendance during a conference; however, academic research is very limited. Some research has touched upon this topic but not explored it as a central issue and it remains opinion-based.

This chapter proceeds with an overview of the impacts and legacies of conferences and the significance of delegate attendance for achieving these outcomes. The background raises questions which lead to the research objectives and the significance of the research. The methodological approach taken is then presented and the chapter concludes with an overview of the thesis structure.

1.1 Background to the research

Australia is located in the Southern Hemisphere. After many years of colonisation by the UK, the elites at that time could only learn from the European cultural achievements that were their only source of knowledge (Bentley & Meek, 2018). With the birth of the first university in Australia in the mid-18th century, Western Enlightenment ideas were further spread in the region; and the curriculum offered by the Australian university was mostly based on the replication of European educational contents. Despite being based on an elitist management model, universities in Australia have been criticised for having a privileged class entry restriction and teaching Western knowledge singularly and thus with a particular bias (Forsyth, 2014). Over time, financial pressures and government regulations have led Australia's universities to move away from elitism and towards the public. The source of income for universities is dependent on public funding and has also attracted individual sponsorship. However, over the past two centuries, the development of universities as a whole has been a tortuous path plagued by government regulations, limited financial resources, and limited exchanges with overseas (Bentley & Meek, 2018). In recent years, the demand for higher education in Australia has increased significantly, with the number of students studying at universities rising from 441,074 in year 1989 to 1.56 million in year 2018 (Dobson, 2020) As one of Australia's three-pillar industries, education also attracts a large number of overseas students; they account for 46% of the current student population of Australian universities (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2018). Correspondingly, with the rise in international student numbers the demand for full-time and fractional full-time staff increased from 76,618 in year 1993 to 130,000 in year 2017 (Dobson, 2020). However, the process of internationalisation and diversification of faculty and students has also brought a high degree of mobility and uncertainty, which poses a significant challenge for universities. Further, there is a discordant voice in the booming higher education sector, where the supposedly creative academic institutions are accused of adopting the "persona of corporations" instead of pursuing research freely (Bentley & Meek 2018 cited in Connell 2014). Academics themselves are generally concerned to maintain academic freedom and conferences provide them with a broad platform to connect with international scholars, thus breaking through the geographical limitations (Parker & Weik, 2014) . The resultant gains in areas such as new knowledge and skills, networks and recognition in their field and job opportunities has ensured that conferences remain an effective way for academics to achieve professional development (Casad, Chang, & Pribbenow, 2016).

The economic benefits that accrue to a host destination as a result of staging a conference have been identified in several studies (Business Events Council of Australia, 2015; Dwyer, 2002; Edwards et al., 2017; Edwards, Foley, & Schlenker, 2011; Events Industry Council, 2018; Foley, Edwards, Jasovska, & Hergesell, 2019; Foley, Schlenker, Edwards, & Lewis-Smith, 2013; Mair, 2014; Meetings and Events Australia, 2015; Rogers, 2013; Weber & Chon, 2002). In industry reports and academic discussions, the most common themes highlight the economic contributions of conferences. Some of these economic benefits include increased tourism expenditure, direct event expenditure, increased utilisation of venue, and improvements to infrastructure.

Beyond the short-term economic performance, conferences also support economies more broadly in terms of contributions to knowledge economies which support industries and employment (Rogers, 2013). Conferences also have environmental, cultural, and social benefits (Rogers & Davidson, 2016) which may be realised over a longer timeframe (Edwards et al., 2017). Conferences not only offer platform-level support for the diffusion of knowledge (Edwards et al., 2011), but also promote friendship among participants. These examples provide a reference and context for a further benefit: the linking of research organisations and industries.

Meetings and conferences are identified as the most widespread channels for university interaction with industry (D'Este & Patel, 2007). At conferences, practitioners and academics exchange information and trigger cues for innovation across different industries and disciplines. Furthermore, the effects of such meetings and conferences are long-lasting (Edwards et al., 2017). Social relationships and networking produced in the context of activities at conferences facilitate long-term collaboration between universities and industries (Cohen, Nelson, & Walsh, 2002; Dutrénit & Arza, 2010; Perkmann & Walsh, 2007; Plewa et al., 2013). Meanwhile, academics who represent research organisations have an opportunity to present their latest research, enhance their reputations, and attract investment and funding (Edwards et al., 2017). Without a doubt, host destinations, industries, institutions, and conference delegates benefit from the impacts that conferences create and engender.

Meeting planners, conference organisers, convention centres, tourism bureaus and other stakeholders leverage for numerous conference benefits, but the events also pose challenges. Facing fierce competition among the conference industry at home and abroad in recent years, conference marketers and convention bureaus identify three challenges: "attendance, attendance, attendance" (Shure, 2002). Attendance has long been seen as a crucial standard used to measure the success of a conference (Oppermann & Chon, 1995; Severt, Fjelstul, & Breiter, 2009; Yoo & Chon, 2010). A survey of association planners revealed nearly half of the associations had the same goal: to increase attendance (Omnipress, 2019) . Attendance does not only refer simply to drawing more participants to register for a conference, but also to secure their attendance/participation throughout the entire conference program. After successfully attracting delegates to attend the conference, keeping them engaged in sessions and social events are important issues. The following examples illustrate that attendance during conferences remains worryingly low. Günther, Grosse, and Klasen (2015,p20) report “on average only half of participants attend a research session at any point in time (of a three-day conference)”. Many conferences have the standard 50-60 per cent attrition rate on the final day (Havens, 2014). It is not unusual to see examples of delegates who signed up at reception but do not appear at conference programs, resulting in sparse attendance. The benefits of meetings and conventions, particularly social legacies, are acquired by means of getting involved with conference-related activities, and participating in interactions between professionals and peers. Researchers have noted concerns regarding these absences and have questioned whether the merits of conferences mentioned above are effectively reduced as a result (Edwards & Foley, 2016).

The failure of delegates to participate in all sessions of a conference reduces the potential benefit to be gained. Businesses and institutions invest large amounts of money and considerable human resources sending employees to conferences for training (Tourism Australia, 2016). When those delegates fail to participate in scheduled sessions, their financial investment and any potential benefits to the employee (including educational and social networking opportunities) may be wasted. There is also the issue of disrespect being show to the speakers when delegates leave a session whilst it is in progress. When a speaker’s presentation is disrupted by “people entering and exiting the room” they are often made to feel unimportant, particularly if others witness the behaviour and follow suit (King et al., 2018,p431). Equally frustrating for the presenters is to find themselves in an unattended session, presenting to an empty room (Henderson & Henderson, 2019). Recognising the potential to contribute to such negatives, absence at conference sessions and social activities is deemed inappropriate behaviour in some institutions (Thompson, Brookins-Fisher, Kerr, & O’Boyle, 2012).

Incomplete conference attendance negatively affects not only sponsoring organisations and conference participants, but also meeting planners, conference organisers and professional associations. For instance, reduced attendance at sessions can diminish conference vibrancy and contribute to lower satisfaction (Edwards & Foley, 2016). Attendees who leave conferences before they end are likely to weaken their social connections (Matsuo & Iwamoto, 2017). Professional associations may be adversely affected in terms of vitality and membership and there is a greater chance of wastage in food and beverage provision and in the service staff resources. Overall, a decrease in the number of attendees influences the long term sustainability of the conference (Stevens, Bressler, & Silver, 2016) and its overall success.

A limited number of studies have addressed the situation in which attendees go to conferences but fail to fully participate (see Havens, 2014; Günther et al. (2015); Henderson (2018).For instance, an article implicitly references non-attendance by saying "quite often one finds low attendance in sessions for contributed papers - people just participated in the sessions with their own talks, and then leave" (Natarajan, 2008,p6). Delegates "feel excluded and bored (at the conference) and leave by mid-afternoon," (Ravn & Elsborg, 2011,p88). Anand (2015,p262) states some attendees are likely to go sightseeing during the conference, observing: "More than half the names announced (at a ceremony of an academic conference) were not present". He also complained that some parallel sessions (including his keynote) were postponed and compressed due to a temporary arrangement of an award ceremony, resulting in "an almost empty hall" when he gave his talk (p.262). Audiences choose to "walk out of a session" (Senese, 2010,p2,3,4; Yucht, 2011,p66) or "hop over to the other session" (Abram, 2008,p2) in situations where their preferred session is cancelled or has fallen short of expectations.

Taken together, the literature reports a significant tendency for delegates to be absent in sessions or social events. However, discussion about this issue has been very brief or only conjecture. A single exception with regards to this particular phenomenon of conference attendees not fully participating has been identified by Edwards and Foley (2016). This extended on the work of Edwards and Griffin (2013,p586) who first proposed the concept "time out" (rather than non-attendance) and applied it in an empirical study to investigate the spatial behaviour of conference attendees who "took time out from a conference during the course of a day". This research focused on delegate's movement patterns out of conference venues and how they explored the conference city. What this research did not uncover however, were the activities delegates engaged in after leaving the conference venue and the reasons why they took time out. A further exploration of the meaning of time out was explored by Foley, Edwards, and Schlenker (2014) who found that time out was viewed as a temporary escape from established routine, and delegates saw this as a better chance to develop friendships by creating a flexible, playful social space at conferences. This study also conceptualised the conference itself as a break (i.e., time out) from daily life, rather than time out needing to be taken during the conference.

Later work by Edwards and Foley (2016) highlights the importance for convention delegates to take time out. The major findings of their studies are summarised as follows: delegates take time out of a conference in order to meet with colleagues, have lunch or coffee away from the conference, do some sightseeing, or go shopping. Delegates may leave the conference because they are constrained by pressures of work and time and it can be difficult to avoid work-related matters, such as relentless emails. Moreover, they proposed that conference delegates may also suffer from jetlag related to travel, mild illness picked up during their travel to the conference destination, or dietary changes during travel and at the conference destination (Edwards & Foley, 2016). However, these are early considerations which require empirical examination.

1.2 Research objective and significance

The aim of this thesis is to investigate why conference delegates do not fully participate in conference programs. To address this goal the following research questions are raised:

I. What are the inhibitors and motivators for participation in conference activities?

II. How do academics perceive their non-attendance during a conference?

III. Are there similarities or differences in what motivates PhD students and academics to not participate in certain aspects of a conference program?

The existing body of research has not examined why non-attendance occurs during conferences. The outcome of this thesis is expected to include a more comprehensive understanding of non-attendance patterns at conferences and reasons why attendees fail to participate fully in sessions and/or social activities. In so doing, this thesis aims to fill the research gap on conference participation and to advance the theory on the association conference aspect of event management.

The findings of this research will benefit conference stakeholders by offering information and strategies for maximising conference attendance. It will assist organisers to learn about the phenomenon of non-attendance in order for them to design events that are able to maintain audience interest. Conference delegates, ultimately the customers or end-buyers of conferences (Cassar, Whitfield, & Chapman, 2020; Lee, Choi, & Breiter, 2016; Oppermann, 1996; Rogers & Davidson, 2016; Tanford, Montgomery, & Nelson, 2012; Wu & Weber, 2005), would benefit from improved programs and services. As such, knowledge explored in this thesis may contribute to facilitating the continued staging of conferences. More importantly, the study aims to offer greater scientific value and significance so that stakeholders can develop approaches for the long-term growth of the meeting and convention industry and tourism in a competitive setting.

1.3 Grounded theory methodology approach to the thesis

As discussed, studies are few in relation to delegates' non-attendance during conferences, thereby limiting understanding of attendance and non-attendance at association conferences. Accordingly, the lack of existing literature on non-attendance in the conference context is the justification for choosing grounded theory. Grounded theory is a general method that offers the researcher limitless options for data gathering and analysis (Fernández, Martin, Gregor, Stern, & Vitale, 2007). The grounded theory approach applied in this thesis uses a qualitative methodology to capitalise on opportunities to gain rigorous research outcomes. As conference delegates are diverse (Edwards et al., 2011; Foley et al., 2019; Mackellar, 2013), the research is expected to reach a depth of understanding of the individual experience of non-attendance during the conference. Grounded theory is an appropriate methodology and tool to conduct a robust description of social context (individual experience) at the micro-level, which is an exploratory inductive approach, and less suited to quantitative research (Jennings & Junek, 2007). To draw on rich data and absorb all ideas, the interviews draw on the perspectives of academics working at universities including research students. Grounded theory methodology in detail is introduced in Chapter 3.

1.4 Structure of thesis

This thesis is structured into five chapters. Chapter 1 has examined the research problem, introduced the significance of the research and its objectives, and discussed the methodology which will be used to carry out the study. Due to the dearth of relevant literature, Chapter 2 proposes a review based on attributes that may be associated with attendance and non-attendance at conference sessions by delegates. Chapter 3 presents grounded theory methodology to provide guidance for the researcher to process the conceptualisation and to pursue further data gathering and analysis. Chapter 4 presents a discussion of the findings and the results are further analysed in Chapter 5 in terms of their relevance to existing literature. Finally, Chapter 6 highlights the implications and contributions of the research, and makes suggestions for future research.

1.5 Chapter summary

Preliminary research indicates it is common for conference delegates to not attend some or all segments of a conference program on offer. Where delegates have registered, but fail to actually attend formal sessions or social events, sparse attendance figures are evident. This lack of attendance during the conference has implications for conference stakeholders including conference participants, sponsoring institutions, meeting planners, conference organisations, and convention bureaus. Very little literature has touched on this topic thus far. This thesis seeks to partially address the gap in the research by examining the factors that impact academics' attendance and non-attendance during conferences, and advance a relevant theory.

2. Theoretical sensitivity

2.1 Introduction

As discussed in Chapter 1, this thesis focuses on the concept of non-attendance in the context of conferences. Before proceeding, it is important to examine existing relevant literature whilst also remaining open to new ideas that may emerge during the stages of data gathering and analysis (Goulding, 2005). To do this, the study utilises theoretical sensitivity, which is regarded as an important component of grounded theory approach. Whilst previous studies have focused on conference attendance and non-attendance they have not deeply or directly analysed motivations for such behaviour based on background knowledge of the subject. The researchers have, however, analysed specific aspects of the behaviour while maintaining openness and sensitivity in data collection and analysis, which is also typical of constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014). The particular operation of constructivist grounded theory is discussed in Chapter 3. This paper investigates the different levels of attendance of participants during conferences. The literature establishing theoretical sensitivity is therefore around the key terms in this research, which are: conference, attendance and non-attendance.

2.2 Conferences

For the purpose of this thesis, a conference is referred to as a gathering that brings like-minded people together to share information, discuss specific topics or deal with problems at a specific time and place (Edwards et al., 2017; Rogers, 2013). Gross and Fleming (2011) have examined the historical development of the conference stating French salons and eighteenth-century British coffee houses were once the gathering place for communication and collision of ideas for intellectuals. The Royal Society of London, an organisation that played a vital role in the Scientific Revolution, absorbed a large number of like-minded amateurs; reaching out to like-minded partners and providing a sense of belonging to the community. They also offered these people an opportunity to actively participate in the meetings organised by the Royal Society. These meetings are considered to be the predecessor of the contemporary academic conference. In the nineteenth century, various universities and colleges carried out activities to disseminate information throughout the academic community. In the twentieth century, trades and industries organised meetings to train employees and increase sales, after which conferences entered a period of rapid growth and development (Rowe, 2019a).

2.2.1 Association conference

Conferences can be segmented into three categories: government (referred to as public sector), corporate, and association conferences (Mair, 2014; McCabe, Poole, Weeks, & Leiper, 2000). Government conferences are held frequently but for fewer days (many are one-day conferences), and are often held in a convenient, central location (Mair, 2014). Such conferences are based mainly on political activity and target legislation formulation and dispute resolution (Rogers & Davidson, 2016). They are often attended by those from covering organisations including authorities, municipalities, government agencies, educational bodies, health services, veterans and military associations from local to international players. Attendees at government conferences are generally of two types: government employees or members of the government and public organisations (McCabe et al., 2000).

Corporate conferences are generally for profit-oriented businesses. Those businesses who send delegates expect them to seek out/access all relevant, practical information that is presented during the conference and to return to their companies with ideas for improving financial outcomes, productivity or new product innovations (Mair, 2014). Accordingly, most delegates are employees of a company. Attendees may also be crucial customers and clients who are invited to take part in business exchange activities and form long relationships (Allen, O'toole, Harris, & McDonnell, 2011). Usually, corporate conferences last from half a day to a day and a half (Rogers, 2013) and have from just a few to thousands of people in attendance. Preparations for this type of conference usually take a relatively short amount of time and begin weeks or a few months in advance. These conferences are initiated mainly by the sales and marketing sectors of a specific organisation for the purposes of new product launches and public relations improvement, or by the personal resource department in order to motivate and train staff, or create an organisational culture (Mair, 2014). Given this situation, delegates do not attend corporate conferences of their own accord most of the time, but rather are required by their organisation to attend. As such, their attendance expenses are normally fully reimbursed by the company, and the budget per delegate is much higher than the respective budget at association conferences (Rogers, 2013).

Association conferences are gatherings facilitated by an organised group of people who have a common interest (Mair, 2014). Attendees are often individuals who actively engage with a community because of shared professions, shared interests, or shared memberships of trade associations, professional societies, voluntary organisations, charities or academic institutions, rather than an employment relationship (Mair, 2014; Rogers, 2013). A wide variety of association conferences are held every year and offered to delegates, so they have a range of potential conferences to choose from. In most instances, delegates pay their way to the conference, although some attendees receive funding from a third party. Attendance numbers at association conferences can range from very few to many thousands, and the scope of such conferences crosses over regions, nations, and the world (Rogers, 2013). Many association conferences rotate to a different destination each time the conference is held, particularly at an international level, where conferences are inclined to be significant in scale and “move around the world in a pre-determined pattern” (Mair, 2014, p11). Compared with other types of conferences, association conferences last from a few days to a few weeks and offer more abundant social programs (Rogers, 2013). Delegates tend to bring partners and family members to enjoy additional activities provided by the event organiser and enjoy the destination’s attractiveness.

An association conference as a platform breaks the geographical boundaries on resources and gathers people of mutual interests and purposes (Fenich, 2016; Lynn & Burns, 2014). One of the important attributes of an association is the knowledge educational function (Omnipress, 2019). By means of interaction and collaboration among the members, the professional limitations of an individual can be overcome, and individuals can share in the group’s collective knowledge. Another thing that attracts people to join an association is to foster new connections and maintain old friendships so as to accelerate professional development and career opportunities. In fact, many people, scholars for example, have multiple academic identities and memberships in different associations. Considering the time and budget constraints, it is not feasible to participate in every activity organised by every association. Conferences, particularly an annual conference of a major group or practice, represent the top choice for academics to attain both their learning and networking goals (Hahm, Breiter, Severt, Wang, & Fjelstul, 2016).

Noting the three main categories of conferences, this thesis focuses on attendees at association conferences. The rationale for selection of association conferences as the focus of this research are:

- The association sector has a much broader base of attendees, and its share in the conference market is on the rise (Cassar et al., 2020; Hahm et al., 2016)
- Attendees at government and corporate conferences are more likely to be directed by their employer to attend while association conference attendees have discretion

(Bauer, Law, Tse, & Weber, 2008; Mair, 2014; Rogers, 2013; Rogers & Davidson, 2016).

- Borrowing from the tourism domain, researchers found the behaviour among association conference attendees and general tourists is remarkably similar (Oppermann & Chon, 1997). That is, delegates at association conferences share this freedom of choice with leisure visitors who are discretionary and enabling delegates to have a 'yes-no decision of attendance' (Mair & Thompson, 2009; Mohammadi & Mohamed, 2010). Given that prior condition of 'a freedom of choice' for conference attendance, a question to consider is whether these association conference attendees are free to choose non-attendance during the conference as well.

The conference program creates the core conference experiences for delegates (Allen et al., 2011). Many delegates consider the conference program is the primary determinant for them when deciding to attend a given conference (Rogers, 2013; Zhang, Leung, & Qu, 2007). The traditional format of the conference can be traced to The Royal Society of London in the 1660s (Sweeting & Hohl, 2015). Although the one-sided structure of the paper presentation format is often criticised for lack of flexibility due to passive listening and the lack of opportunity for further discussion on contested questions due to time limits at sessions (Carpenter, 2016; Carpenter & Linton, 2018; Hale & Bessette, 2016), this pattern of conference formatting continues today. The reason is largely a result of a consensus reached by "an aim for the middle approach" (Cufaude, 2004) cited in Pradhan (2014,p35).

Incorporating the views of Cufaude (2004) , Lewis (2005) , and Bowden (2006), Pradhan (2014) points out that it is very difficult to equally please mixed stakeholders with diverse backgrounds, cultural differences, learning styles and habits, and multiple objectives and requirements. Pradhan (2014) has found that new conference formats such as an *unconference* cannot meet the needs of all conference delegates and can cause discomfort for some delegates from certain cultures and with particular learning preferences. Unconference includes simulation of an open space environment (for instance, Cafe), allowing attendees to shuttle in the conference room freely. After optimising the questions or theme set in the room, one can start a discussion with people around at any time. Alternatively, attendees can be divided into teams of three to six members, completing a designated task in a short period time (Pradhan, 2014,p49). Although there are various forms of unconference appearing in the formats of different conferences, most of them are short-lived and have not been widely popularised. This may explain why organisers continue to follow the traditional structure regardless of the criticism it receives. In addition to presentations, the conference setting includes official social events carried out during the course of the scheduled conference.

2.2.2 Features of an association conference

On the one hand, conferences that create and share knowledge, strengthen delegates' connections with their communities, and receive public praise with high quality programs and keynote speakers of high prestige are probably taken as a priority choice for delegates' conference attendance. On the other hand, some researchers propose that conferences have the possibility of undesirable effects thus inhibiting delegates from participating (Ford & Harding, 2008; Henderson, 2018; Martin et al., 2015; Ravn & Elsborg, 2011). Based on the features, the conference is analysed in the following areas (see Table 1):

Table 1: Features of association conferences

A place for learning	A place for visibility	An extension of workplace	A bonus for tourism
formal approach (De Vries & Pieters, 2007; Ghosh and Githens (2009) Temerbayeva, 2018; Vanneste (2008,p61)	junior and senior academics (Hansen, 2018; Hansen, Pedersen, Foley 2020; Timperley, Sutherland, Wilson, & Hall, 2020)	hierarchical status (Ford & Harding, 2008, 2010)	family accompany (Lassen, 2006; Rogers & Davidson, 2016; Tourism Australia, 2016; Tretyakevich & Maggi, 2012; Yoo & Wilson, 2017, 2020)
informal learning (Collins, 2004; McAleer & Oxley, 2001); Oxford Royale Academy (2016); Sousa and Clark (2017)	female academics (Henderson, Cao, & Mansuy, 2018; Jones, Fanson, Lanfear, Symonds, & Higgie, 2014)	supplementary to work duty (Ford & Harding, 2008; Lee and Back (2007a);Ramirez, Laing, and Mair (2013)	overseas destinations (Ngamsom & Beck, 2000)
networking opportunities (Mair & Thompson, 2009; Malek, Mohamed, & Ekiz, 2011; Yoo & Chon, 2008; Yoo & Zhao, 2010).			local attractions and recreational activities (Baloglu & Love, 2005; Chacko & Fenich, 2000; Crouch & Louviere, 2004; Jin, Weber, & Bauer, 2013; Kang, Suh, & Jo, 2005; Kim, Moon, & Choe, 2016; Lee et al., 2016; Lee & Back, 2007b; Mody, Gordon, Lehto, So, & Li, 2016; Murdy & Pike, 2012; Rogers and Davidson, 2016; Ryu & Lee, 2013; (Tretyakevich & Maggi, 2012)

Many studies have confirmed that learning (or 'education purpose' in some research) is the most significant motivator of conference attendance, and networking is the next most important factor (Deery, Jago, Fredline, & Dwyer, 2005; Kordts‐Freudinger, Al‐Kabbani, & Schaper, 2017; Severt, Wang, Chen, & Breiter, 2007), especially for first-time conference visitors (Kim, Lee, & Kim, 2012) and students (Fakunle, Dollinger, Alla-Mensah, & Izard, 2019; Matsuo & Iwamoto, 2017; Wood, Louw, & Zuber-Skerritt, 2017). Some researchers draw different conclusions and stress the significance of networking opportunities at conferences (Mair & Thompson, 2009; Malek et al., 2011; Yoo & Chon, 2008; Yoo & Zhao, 2010). But in fact, networking is also a kind of learning where attendees interact with each other and share information that contributes to knowledge creation and transmission (Pradhan, 2014). Accordingly, the ultimate goal of conference participants is for educational benefits in general.

For students, conferences can be regarded as extra-curricular programs of learning and a key feature of educational requirements (Conn et al., 2014; Coryell & Murray, 2014; Fakunle et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2017). Vanneste (2008,p61) labels learning at conferences using an "educational scope of directions", which means learning can take place at different levels, from top (senior), horizontal (peer or peer-near), and down (bottom-up education). Kuzhabekova and Temerbayeva (2018) and Ghosh and Githens (2009) elucidate this form of learning as either a unidirectional relationship (which newcomers approach in a unilateral way to learn skills and experiences from veterans) or a bidirectional relationship (which is a process of upgrading knowledge and insights through mutual promotion and exchange among both inexperienced and experienced participants). Delegates learn from conferences in a variety of ways, through formal and informal methods. Formal approaches are thought to include presentations, workshops, and roundtable, while informal occasions are generally considered to be coffee or lunch breaks, and other social events (De Vries & Pieters, 2007).

This section begins with the formal learning. Attendees arrive at sessions to obtain knowledge in a formal context in order to transform major gains at conferences into research and practice for the future. In such situations, attendees behave as learners, and presenters behave as learning objects and knowledge initiators. However, as the subject of study, delegates are not people who know nothing about the presentation topics. Rather, delegates come with a wide variety of professional backgrounds and academic identities. They know what their roles at conferences are and have high expectations about what they will learn from sessions. Previous research has shown that the delegates are much more likely to defect from a conference (or switch to another conference session) if they are not satisfied with the program (Tanford et al., 2012).

Furthermore, sitting in a conference room and listening to a presentation occasionally offers opportunities for a group of people to meet and learn, however such a format is limited to mutual exchange. The space virtually distances the instructor who stands at the front and learners who sit in the rows, and makes it difficult to create intimacy among individuals. By using the conclusion of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2005), Ravn and Elsborg (2011) point out that delegates become emotionally, mentally, and physically exhausted easily when their needs are not met. They further argue that the lack of time to have self-formulation, and fewer opportunities to express their own interest, make it difficult for delegates to assimilate into conference programs. This can result in feelings of exclusion and may motivate attendees to leave early.

There is no doubt delegates benefit significantly from formal learning, however, many researchers place greater value on informal learning than formal learning (Collins, 2004; McAleer & Oxley, 2001). To learn at conferences means not only presenting ideas and receiving feedback, posting queries and solving problems, disseminating knowledge, absorbing new information, and acquiring skills and techniques in formal sessions but also sharing interests and interacting with others at social events. However, some commentators Gosling and Noordam (2006), Oxford Royale Academy (2016), Sousa and Clark (2017) suggest being absent from a formal session is sometimes necessary and useful. If non-attendance is viewed as a reasonable act, the question is, how can attendees best learn, acquire knowledge and enjoy networking opportunities?

Marsick and Watkins (2001) indicate that informal learning is usually not highly structured. Collins (2004), for example, places more importance on informal contact, and believes that face-to-face exchanges can enhance mutual relationships and foster trust. Conversations happen by chance, between sessions or outside meeting rooms and allow delegates to speak their opinions freely. Delegates visit a networking activity with the intent of socialising with current and new colleagues and seasoned professionals in order to enhance mutual understanding and gain access to collaborative opportunities. By deepening communication, new sparks will be inspired and new learning will develop incidentally.

- **Conferences: a place for visibility**

Visibility has potential benefits including publication and funding opportunities (Käfer et al., 2018). Hansen (2018) supports this argument stating the most noteworthy benefit of attending a conference lies in visibility. Conferences offer a new approach for novice researchers to meet senior scholars, journal editors, advisors and career mentors in their given field (Lirgg et al., 2010). This is especially important for those fledgling junior academics who are still at the stage of career advancement where they are not yet known or are little known but wish to achieve recognition. This makes them even more desperate for a platform to make their presence felt (Timperley, Sutherland, Wilson, & Hall, 2020). The conference gives them an excellent opportunity to realise their desire to gain attention by presenting their research and meeting with authorities on the spot. Senior academics, who have already achieved a particular reputation in their field hope to be recognised by the public through the continuous exposure of new research results and hope to attract more cooperation or investment to increase recognition and standing. Simultaneously, the publication of authors who are followed is also highly likely to gain attention and improve the citation to their research (Funk, Hu, & Rauterberg, 2012) This is why the international conference as an international stage is so attractive to them (Parker & Weik, 2014).It could be proposed that if an academic is absent from conferences and conference-related activities it may reduce their visibility, and hence their capacity to attract grant funding, be notified of or successfully apply for new positions, and connect with cooperative or like-minded colleagues, sponsors and partners.

Access to conferences is strongly connected to access to career development opportunities and may be of particular significance in relation to female academics because historically they enjoy less visibility via conferences on average than their male counterparts (Henderson et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2014). Women's lack of visibility at conferences (and therefore their potential to demonstrate ability) is evident in terms of inclusion and access. Women are underrepresented at conferences in general, particularly in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines (Carr, 2013; King et al., 2018; Meng, Pelletier, Parker, & Croft, 2015; Partiali, Oska, & Touriel, 2020; Tulloch, 2020; Walters, 2018; Xu & Martin, 2011). Due to stereotypical influences, women have also been traditionally underestimated in their capabilities as professionals (Farr et al., 2017). Women experience unequal treatment in academia, not only in terms of underrated professional capabilities, but also in disproportionate access to resources relative to their male colleagues. As stated above, conference-associated activities such as session participation, presentations, and plenary talks provide a platform for academics to gain recognition and visibility. Female researchers face greater difficulties being nominated to attend, and applying for funding or travel cost reimbursement than their male colleagues (Sardelis & Drew, 2016). As a consequence, the lower proportion of women at conferences reflects a pervasive, unoptimistic trend. The dominant male participation rates could also act as a factor to further reduce the number of female attendees. Whilst there is evidence women have made significant advances in the workplace, they are still underrepresented at the top level (Martin, 2015). The metaphor, "leaky pipeline", is frequently used by researchers to explain the sharp reduction in the percentage of female employees in top positions [e.g., (Farr et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2014; Käfer et al., 2018; Loison et al., 2017; Shaw & Stanton, 2012)]. This inequity results in increasing numbers of women remaining stuck in lower positions and opting out of their career or job-hopping. Most obviously, the phenomenon of a "leaky pipeline" can always be reflected in conference participants, which means women in senior positions are a minority at conferences (Blumen & Bar-Gal, 2006; Hinsley, Sutherland, & Johnston, 2017). Meanwhile, men have more opportunities for advancement in each career phase in comparison with women. This may explain the reason male delegates are still the primary attendees at conferences, especially in conference roles with the highest status (King et al., 2018).

Even when women do attend conferences, they have been found to be at higher risk of encountering negative experiences (Flores, 2020; Jackson, 2019; Timperley et al., 2020). Women feel either professional alienation, in that their contribution is not properly recognised, or they are not taken seriously. Women are less frequently invited to give speeches at a high-profile session for example, and rather than lead oral presentations, (which are more popular and have larger audiences), they are commonly diverted to speak at poster sessions (which are significantly of less status in STEM sector conferences). Moreover, the on-site atmosphere including inequality and exclusion makes female delegates find it difficult to access main professional networks (Blumen & Bar-Gal, 2006; Sabharwal, Henderson, & Joseph, 2020) possibly causing them to feel excluded from a world which is primarily comprised of men. Eden (2016) explains this phenomenon. She suggests individual advancements can often be realised through resources obtained in an interactive environment among members of a particular community. However, these resources are mostly held by men who do not welcome women to encroach on their powerful connections. Women find themselves alienated from the male-dominated environment and thus maintain roles of outsiders or trespassers in formal and informal networking. These experiences bring about negative feelings, and many women respond passively; diminishing their presence and thereby avoiding these negative feelings. They diminish their presence by expressing their opinions less frequently, shortening the length and content of their presentations and plenary talks, and not being active participants in conference activities. With these factors occurring, the question is whether women experiencing such exclusion remain passively in their seats or take other actions to physically remove themselves. Further research is needed to discuss whether low visibility triggers attendees, particularly women, to attend less at conferences. Women at the senior career stage (e.g. full professor) are relatively less susceptible to gender pressure and may have more confidence to express themselves (Johnson, Smith, & Wang, 2017). As their careers grow, their emboldened characteristics may rise with seniority and authority. The question still exists, however, could senior female academics be more engaged in conference activities?

- **Conferences: an extension of workplace**

In some cases, conferences serve as a microcosm of the workplace that is not only suffused within masculine culture but also hierarchy (Eden, 2016; Ford & Harding, 2008, 2010). A conference is perceived as an extension of the workplace (Bauer et al., 2008; Rogers, 2013), in part because of the following. As noted earlier, students and academics receive grants from their institutions to attend conferences. They are required to fulfil their responsibilities not only to present their papers at conferences, but also to learn new information and skills, promote their development, achieve external exchanges and cooperation, and carry forward the institution's reputation. Conference venues, thereby, create new but temporary workplaces in which employees (namely conference attendees in this research) facilitate their work missions. To further these aims, delegates are asked to participate in conference programs.

As in the workplace, a hierarchical status applies to many conferences and is shaped by different levels of delegates. Ford and Harding (2010) found that some presenters are field specialists and may feel superior to the audience and (intentionally or unintentionally) show arrogance and elitism in their language and behaviour. Therefore, the relationship between speakers and listeners is sometimes less equal. Moreover, research students arrive at conferences expecting to further advance both personal and professional goals. Some scholars have raised concerns that many doctoral students, especially those new to research, fail to fully integrate into the conference program (Alshammari & Abu-Dawood, 2018; Chapman et al., 2009). The structure of conferences is sometimes accused of building a barrier for novices and reinforcing unequal power relationships between new researchers and senior ones (Semler & Cavanagh, 2014). It is not easy for young researchers to access academic circles from the periphery to the core, therefore, cooperation and collaboration is more common among peers or colleagues at the same stage of their academic studies (Chapman et al., 2009).

It might also happen that delegates' identities can be lost when a conference is viewed as a place or space with "control over academic, managerial, and professional employees" (Ford & Harding, 2008,p3). Based on the findings of Lee and Back (2007a) and Ramirez et al. (2013) supervisors and peers also play a role in deciding whether to attend a conference. They emphasise the fact that conference attendance is supplementary to work duty, therefore, is more or less subject to organisational arrangements in terms of their organisational business decision. In view of this, academics are sometimes required to attend conferences to gain professional insights that could contribute to the development of their institution. Consequently, they often attend in workplace-based groups, which enhance the collective consciousness and their collaboration with colleagues at the same organisation.

Given that conferences can be seen as an extension of the workplace, conference attendees see their attendance as part of their responsibilities instead of something they desire. Roles they play as participants and professional employees represent a certain group, rather than a person with an independent singularity in the mass. Participants need only to follow the herd and go through the usual processes since the physical place of the conference equates with part of the workplaces. Therefore, delegates' experiences of being at conferences is to lose their identity and become passive (Ford & Harding, 2008). The interesting point related to 'work activity' at conferences is whether delegates will act otherwise. Due to the lack of previous research, 'emotions', which is regarded as a fundamental aspect of conference participation experience, is not well-understood (Mair & Frew, 2016). Further, a shift in emotions often translates into a physical response. These responses will be varied, however further investigation into this aspect of conference participation is warranted. Based on the gap in the literature, the objective of this thesis is to examine whether uncomfortable feelings including inferiority, being marginalised in networking activities, and responding to alienation with only passive participation are determining factors in delegates' non-attendance at conferences.

However, not all institutions have an explicit or mandatory requirement that all conference programs must be attended by delegates who accept sponsorship. Except for the discussion of delegates' attendance at conferences in Thompson et al. (2012)'s content, there is very little discussion in the literature about whether delegates should treat their attendance as workplace attendance and follow the relevant discipline and order. Thompson et al. (2012) paid more attention to students' participation and only pointed out to academic staff that they should act as supervisors of students when attending and set a good example during the conference. Therefore, it is debatable whether attendees regard the conference as a workplace and need to strictly refer to its attendance system to regulate their attendance at the conference. Although some conferences are required to be attended as a group or for group activities, the attendees are, after all, PhD students and academic staff from universities. The neoliberal university may also be more tolerant of these attendees in terms of schedule, rather than limiting them to pursue various possibilities for acquiring knowledge (Henderson, 2018). Therefore, delegates are supposed to have more freedom in their decision to attend academic conferences and it is largely discretionary to attend (Mair & Thompson, 2009). In this instance, can delegates' participation behaviour be considered as being out of the workplace and not subject to relevant terms and conditions to participate on their own or absent from any session or social events? The 'emotions' generated by such a free choice and the corresponding actions that will be made are also worth discussing in the subsequent research.

- **Conferences: a bonus for tourism**

A significant number of conference attendees travel with their partners or family members (accompanying persons or partners) in order to experience conference destinations with them (Lassen, 2006; Rogers & Davidson, 2016; Tourism Australia, 2016; Tretyakevich & Maggi, 2012; Yoo & Wilson, 2017, 2020), especially when delegates have an opportunity to enjoy activities with their family at overseas destinations (Ngamsom & Beck, 2000). Ligos (2000) argues that delegates who bring their family members work more efficiently and increase their output compared to those who go by themselves. Unlike traditional forms of travel, Yoo, McIntosh, and Cockburn-Wootten (2016,p446) argue that conference travel has become "an alternative opportunity for family leisure activities presenting a clear trend towards mixing business, leisure and relationship commitments," (p446).

Oppermann (1996) notes conference attendance is improved if the conference takes place in a destination with good local attractions and recreational activities. This is why many researchers claim the destination profile is one of the dominant factors organisers consider when selecting a host site for a conference (Baloglu & Love, 2005; Chacko & Fenich, 2000; Crouch & Louviere, 2004; Jin, Weber, & Bauer, 2013; Kang, Suh, & Jo, 2005; Kim, Moon, & Choe, 2016; Lee et al., 2016; Lee & Back, 2007b; Mody, Gordon, Lehto, So, & Li, 2016; Murdy & Pike, 2012); Ryu and Lee (2013) specifically list entertainment activities, shopping facilities and sightseeing opportunities as bonuses for conference host cities. There is evidence that leisure interests and cultural activities positively affect business travellers' intentions to attend a conference, and such leisure behaviours differ from nation to nation (Tretyakevich & Maggi, 2012). For example, facilities integrated into a resort (including shopping facilities) have great appeal to Chinese attendees as compared to non-Asian delegates (So, Li, & Lehto, 2011). Moreover, Choi (2014) found that business visitors place greater emphasis on the hedonic value than the utilitarian and social value of conferences. Such a pleasure value has a stronger significance for participant satisfaction and behaviour intention than utilitarian and social values. For this reason, it is more probable that delegates who engage in in-depth tourism and recreation at a destination would extend the trip and bring travel partners (Davidson, 2003). Of relevance to this research, however, is the issue of whether such factors may also act to decrease attendance at conference sessions. Rogers and Davidson (2016) discuss whether recreational facilities outside of conference venues are attractive to delegates and encourage them to "wander off during important conference programs," (Rogers & Davidson, 2016,p218).

It has also been found that the scope of a conference (i.e., community, regional, state, national, international conference) and the mix of attendees' place of origin (e. g. domestic or international delegates) may influence delegate attendance. For instance, Severt et al. (2007) examined a regional conference, where destination was not a factor attracting conference attendees. Destination factors seem to be less attractive for local delegates from immediate vicinities of a host city, so that they may have a tight schedule and focus more on the conference itself. On the contrary, Ngamsom and Beck (2000), in the context of international conferences, suggest the overseas destination experience and outdoor recreation opportunities are the biggest reasons that drive people to attend a conference. The other possibility that would come out of the discussion is whether delegates participate in the entire conference program where an overseas destination has so much to offer. Furthermore, the variance of conference visitors is dependent on the type and duration of the conference. Multi-day conferences are preferred by overseas and interstate participants, whereas single day conferences attract a larger proportion of local delegates (Business Events Council of Australia, 2015). Accordingly, international and regional delegates have more opportunities to squeeze in tourist attractions and social programming, which may reduce their available conference time. The length of stay would also affect the delegates' decision to participate and set their own plans.

Where families accompany conference delegates to a destination (where there is an intended mix of business and pleasure on the trip) absenteeism from conference sessions and social activities may be higher due to family and/or leisure/tourism opportunities. Furthermore, traveling with children, (especially young ones) heightens the difficultly of conference trips (Lipton, 2019). Some activities are set for the early morning (e. g. networking breakfasts, opening ceremonies) and some events are held in the evening (e. g. gala dinners, closing ceremonies). Such early and late conference schedules are challenging for those with childcare responsibilities (Calisi & Working Group of Mothers in Science, 2018). As an extension of this, there may be a tendency for those attending with children to break away to check on them periodically. The impact such responsibilities may have on a delegate's ability to enjoy the conference experience fully have also been the subject of research (Henderson & Moreau, 2020; Lipton, 2019). This raises the question of whether being absent from certain parts of the conference are in some ways premeditated at the early stage when they start planning their conference attendance with the knowledge that they will have children with them.

Delegates attend conferences for many reasons. The most common is the conference's ability to provide a place for learning, for being visible, for working, and for tourism. However, different expectations and an individual delegate's conference positioning have a great influence on their attitude towards attendance behaviours. In terms of learning, researchers benefit from knowledge creation, information exchange and resource sharing at sessions. Research students have the opportunity to learn from entry-level experience in the professional sphere and specialty community. However, informal learning appears to be equally important for delegates and may affect their attendance at formal sessions. Female delegates are more challenged, in that they have fewer opportunities to take part in major events and their exposure (through presenting at prestigious sessions and being involved in social networking events) is less. Conferences partly reflect the inequality in power relationships in the workplace that makes delegates feel uncomfortable at times (Ford & Harding, 2008, 2010). Participation at conferences is treated as a work assignment that leads delegates to passively follow the conference proceedings and may prompt them to choose to be absent from the program if they think it may not matter. In this respect, attendees hardly value the importance of full attendance at most conferences. Lastly, delegates tend to bring partners and family members to enjoy additional activities provided by the conference organisation and a destination's attractiveness. An understanding of the effect of tourism on attendance during the conference is required. In short, it is unclear how the positioning of conferences as a place of learning, visibility, work and tourism affects delegates' attendance decisions during a conference.

2.2.3 Association conference attendees

Attendees are people who come together toward some common purposes in a particular location within a specified time (Lewis & Kerr, 2012). Conference attendees are also termed as conference participants, conference audiences, conference delegates, conference visitors, conference goers, conference attenders, and conferees. There are various classifications referring to people who attend conferences. For instance, King et al. (2018) classify conference attendees at sessions into three categories: audiences, presenters, and chairs (session conveners). The major role as an audience at a conference is to listen to presentations and take part in the discussion. Presenters share knowledge and communicate with audiences. Session chairs have an effect of breaking the ice, and controlling the process. Session chairs and presenters also have the role of audience at some point in the conference.

Hilliard and Tyra (2006) classifies conference attendees into three groups: researchers, practitioners, and students (Coryell & Murray, 2014). Due to increasing university engagement with industry and joint projects and publications among researchers and practitioners (Ankrah & Omar, 2015; Cai, Ramis Ferrer, & Luis Martinez Lastra, 2019; Perkmann, King, & Pavelin, 2011; Skute, Zalewska-Kurek, Hatak, & de Weerd-Nederhof, 2019), crossover cooperation and reciprocal benefits are driving industry experts to attend more conferences (Edwards et al., 2017; Graham & Kormanik, 2004). However, practitioners have a relativity low presence at conferences and researchers including research students represent the mainstream as conference attendees. Although there are other types of delegates (e. g. journal editors and book publishers), they are a small percentage of conference attendees. Also, academics and PhD students are most invested in terms of gaining knowledge, visibility, and access. In this regard, this research focuses on major players attending conferences, that is, academics who work in universities, including PhD students.

Different groups may have different requirements through their professional levels, which may be evidenced in different ways in their conference attendance. Matsuo and Iwamoto (2017) believe students attend conferences more for educational purpose while non-student attendees attach greater importance to the networking. Research students are encouraged to attend conferences for many reasons. Conferences allow newcomers to share their research and deliver public talks and to build their academic resume and professional identities (Semler & Cavanagh, 2014). Attendance at conferences also improves networking opportunities and helps to create deeper ties within communities that are otherwise difficult to access (Edwards et al., 2017; Ghosh

& Githens, 2009; Martin et al., 2015). Furthermore, attendance at conferences plays a key role in job opportunities (Brown & Finigan-Carr, 2014), and the likelihood of meeting potential postdoctoral supervisors or employers (Cherrstrom, 2012). Overall, the literature suggests that PhDs should attend conferences and make use of the opportunities they offer. Therefore, there is a need to discuss how those opportunities (or what students expect to achieve at the conference) are related to their performance and attendance at the conference.

Delegates at different career stages may have dissimilar aims or needs. For instance, a conference welcome reception may appeal more to up-and-coming young researchers than mid or late career academics who have already advanced their reputations and careers. Edwards et al. (2011) clearly distinguish academic delegates based on their years of work experience and indicate that attendees employed for less than five years in the field tend to be quite positive towards opportunities for career enhancement and research collaboration as a result of conference attendance, while delegates who have worked longer than five years are more interested in affirming established networks. Research has found that the attraction of professional development opportunities is minimal in association conference attendees over 55 years of age (Schambach & Blanton, 2001).

In addition to career stages, the motivation to attend a conference between first-time conference visitors and those who have attended many previous conferences is significantly different (Chiang & Li, 2012; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Kim et al., 2012). First-timers are more concerned with professional education followed by social networking, while repeat attendees' value social networking as the most influencing attribute. Additionally, the site environment is more engaging for first-time visitors but not for those who have previously been in that environment (Kim et al., 2012). The reason for this is that the first-timers are more likely to travel to seek new experiences, particularly different cultures and sights (Chiang & Li, 2012), while those who are regular speakers at conferences tend not to show as much interest in the destination (Tourism Australia, 2016). Kim and Kim (2017,p549) further divide repeat visitors into infrequent and frequent attendees. In their definition, infrequent attendees are people who attend "one conference a year at most" and keep the conference program and venue front of mind. Frequent attendees who attend "more than two conferences every year (at least)" tend to prioritise conference programs over other factors. In response, this research will explore differences between how first-timers and repeat conference visitors view their attendance experiences, as well as their perceptions around missing sessions and/or social activities. Given the above, the conference attendees can be classified in the Table 2.

Table 2: Association conference attendees

Author	Attendee categories
King et al. (2018)	audiences, presenters, and chairs (session conveners)
Hilliard and Tyra (2006) and Coryell & Murray (2014)	researchers, practitioners, and students
Matsuo and Iwamoto (2017)	students vs. non- students
Edwards et al. (2011)	delegates at different career stages
Chiang & Li (2012) and Fakeye & Crompton (1991) and Kim et al. (2012)	first-timers vs. repeat attendees
Kim and Kim (2017,p549)	infrequent vs. frequent attendees

Research on association conference attendance to date has focused on decision-making and motivations/barriers to participation before the conference (Cassar et al., 2020; Mair, Lockstone-Binney, & Whitelaw, 2018; Yoo & Chon, 2008) and post conference evaluations of satisfaction, or intentions to return (e.g. (Ali, Hussain, & Ari Ragavan, 2014; Kim & Kim, 2017)). However, attendance during the conference has rarely been discussed. Additionally, it can be observed that extant works regarding attendance during the conference are opinion-based, and authors have drawn conclusions based on sparse data or anecdotal experience. This leaves a clear void in terms of explaining attendance and non-attendance during the conference itself.

2.3 Attendance and non-attendance

The outline of the terms '*attendance'* and '*non-attendance*' is roughly sketched with prior knowledge gained from a comprehensive literature search. Non-attendance is further examined under different contexts (conference delegates and employees) to see whether concepts such as 'absenteeism' borrowed from other disciplines (e. g. organisational management) apply in the case of conferences.

2.3.1 Unpacking attendance prior to fieldwork

For the purpose of this thesis, the notion of attendance during a conference refers to full participation in the conference program, including a full load of formal sessions and social activities during a conference each day.

Gordon and Gledhill (2018) view 'full participation' thus:

> " Full and effective participation means consideration and facilitation of meaningful service user participation in all aspects of the conference – whether as key-note presenters, as concurrent session presenters, as poster presenters, as panel members, as active audience members, and as social and networking event attendees, supporting the enjoyment of freedom of thought and expression through all avenues and in all capacities," (p.127).

However, delegates are unable to be physically present at the plurality of sessions taking place at the same time. In this case, attendees need only meet the criterion by attending any of the parallel sessions being held. Furthermore, the new way to deliver a formal session, for instance, *unconference* methods where "attendees could visit all presentations at their own pace and change between rooms at any time during sessions" is also excluded (Kordts‐Freudinger et al., 2017,p31). The formal session in this research refers to a traditional model of sessions that are well-established in a "talk-discussion-talk-discussion" format such as workshops, forums, roundtables, and debates (Kordts‐Freudinger et al., 2017,p29). Social activities feature formal occasions such as welcome receptions, opening and closing ceremonies, lunch breaks, gala dinners, and other functions (depending on the different programs offered by a particular conference). Program sessions that are optional and require a separate charge (e.g., pre- and post-conference tour) are not within the scope of this research.

2.3.2 Unpacking non-attendance prior to fieldwork

One study that comes close to examining the issues of non-attendance at conferences is that of Gordon and Gledhill (2018). Sharing personal stories, one of the writers makes the case for why he was unable to participate fully at a particular conference. The author felt excluded from the whole group, triggering intense psychological distress as a response, and then was plagued by physical discomfort. Given the circumstances, the choice was made to spend "the majority of the conference in my room and most definitely did not attend the conference dinner," (p.112). This research focuses on reasons for lack of inclusion at conferences and provides information which may be of use to those organising conferences, particularly those who are seeking to minimise delegates' mental, physical or emotional distress, and for those aiming to cater for people with disabilities. From their research, we can reasonably argue that attitudinal and environmental barriers hinder attendees who may have mobility difficulties from participating fully and effectively in conferences. However, their results only focus on a particular group of delegates and highlight the problem of inclusive services at conferences. Therefore, the conclusion for non- attendance arrives from a single perspective and does not have a wide adaptability to apply to general conference delegates.

Table 3 (below) presents the ways in which authors have described delegates who were absent during conferences. Terms such as skip, drop, time out, hop over, miss out, shave off, and early departure are common. The table also notes the reasons for non-attendance. Whilst there is no common terminology, each indicates a delegate's non-attendance at some stage during the conference program. To build a more robust framework, the concept of non-attendance is explored based on the author's own theoretical sensitivity before fieldwork. It is noted that 'a slip of the mind' or 'free-floating attention' could conceivably be regarded as absent-minded acts at conferences. However, these actions are less tangible, making them difficult to assess and clarify. This thesis is not intended to question the change in mental presence but rather to focus purely on conference attendees' physical presence at a session and/ or social event.

Table 3: Examples of literature referring to 'non-attendance' at conferences

Reason for non-attendance	Author	Expression on the non-attendance	Non-attendance during conference	Specific cause for their non-attendance	Category of reference
Lack of interests	Gosling & Noordam (2006)	skip; slip out	formal session	not to waste mental energy on presentations that are not relevant to delegates' specialised area	Book chapter (advice to PhDs for their first international conference)
	Natarajan (2008)	leave	conference program	only participate the sessions with their own talks	Journal (author's conference experience and his advice to attendees)
	Abram (2008)	hop over; leave	formal session	sessions are lower than expected	Monthly magazine (advice to conference attendees)
	Yucht (2011)	walk out	formal session	sessions are not useful	Book chapter (conference-going strategies)
	Castronova (2013)	drop	formal session	social activities are more valuable than formal sessions	Journal (advice to a new conference format)
Busy with other things	The Agent (2009)	not being able to attend the entire conference	conference program	engage in business activities	Journal (feedback of conference attendance from different delegates)
	Neves, Lavis, and Ranson (2012)	attend the conference for own presentation only;	conference program	extremely busy	Journal (a new classification for conference delegates)

		morning arrival and afternoon departure			
	Henderson (2018)	miss; unable to fully be there; only attend for their own presentation; not there the whole time; missed parts	conference program	is not able to attend the first day conference due to fully work arrangement; multiple simultaneous commitments during the conference	Book chapter (an introduction to feminist conference time)
	Henderson & Moreau (2020)	leave the conference early; arrive late for session; leave;	conference program	family commitment	Journal (care issues when participating in conference)
Tour-oriented	Anand (2015)	do not present	conference program	go for sightseeing	Journal (author's conference experience)
	Rogers & Davidson (2016)	wander off	conference programs	delegates are lured by the attractiveness at conference destination	Book (event management related)
Conference fatigue and uncomfortable feeling and	Ravn & Elsborg (2011)	leave	conference program	delegates feel excluded and bored	Journal (facilitating learning at conferences)
	Sousa & Clark (2017)	attend “certain” or “most important” sessions	formal session	distractions and exhaustion spawned by participating too many sessions	Journal (academic conference-going strategies)
	Gordon & Gledhill (2018)	not attend	conference program	psychological and physical suffering	Journal (author's conference experience and advice to organize a good conference)

	Flores (2020)	avoid attending; skip	conference program	harassment at conferences	Journal (narrated harassment that occurs at academic conferences)
Cost-savings	Salzmann-Erikson (2014)	do not attend	social event (closing-ceremony)	tight schedule for travelling back home	Journal (author’s experience in attending conference and advices to novice researchers)
	McCurry (2017)	skip	social event (meals)	delegates are reluctant to participate because the meal is not covered in the conference program	Weblog (accessibility at conferences)
	Henderson, Cao & Mansuy (2018)	miss part of; shave off	conference program	save time and money	Project report (academic conference participation’s caring responsibilities)
Passive absence	Senese (2010)	walk out	formal session	sessions/presentation are not valuable to listen; presenter has insufficient respect for audiences by reading the text	Journal (author’s conference experiences)
	Gross & Fleming (2011)	skip	formal session	(presenter) is not ready to give a talk	Book chapter (introduction to social functions of academic conferences)
	Semler & Cavanagh (2014)	poor attendance; low attendance	conference program	session is hold on the day towards the end of the week and far away from downtown	Journal (newcomers’ experience to attend a conference)

	Günther, Grosse & Klasen (2015)	session hopping; late arrival and early departure	formal session	early morning effect; specific days (as the weekend approaches)	Working paper (Discussion on factors that attract academics to attend conferences)
	Henderson & Henderson (2019)	low attendance; no one is coming; room is empty no one turn up	formal session	session is scheduled in a "graveyard slot" (i.e., the last hour of the conference); unattended session and cancelled ultimately	Journal (author's personal conference experience)
For multiple reasons	Lohan (2012)	leave; escape; skip	formal session	catch up with clients/ colleagues; stay away from a noisy environment	Journal (author and other delegates' conference experience)
	Thompson et al., (2012)	miss; absence	conference program	sessions are boring; do not feel well; go skiing (use the conference as a vacation	Journal (ethical issues in professional development and behaviour at conferences)
	Edwards & Griffin (2013)	time out	conference program	rid themselves of a tight conference schedule; go city sightseeing; visit friends and colleagues; go shopping	Journal (delegates' spatial behaviour in the conference cities)

	Oxford Royale Academy (2016)	skip; miss out;	conference program	to allocate schedule and balance attendances and breaks	Website (tips for first conference attendees)
	Edwards & Foley (2016)	time out	conference programs	tour and go sightseeing; go shopping; physical discomfort; are caught up in the work and trivialities	Presentation at an academic conference: the importance of convention delegates' timeout)
	Henderson (2019)	low attendance; not very well attended; sparsely populated room; empty chair; non-attendance of a session; absent; skip parts; leave; not attend; escape	formal session	session is in the final session (in the last day); personal travel; childcare issue	Book (gender, knowledge production in the conference)
	Rowe (2017)	absence	formal (poster) session	/	Book (a guidance on poster presentation at the academic/ scientific conference

In response to non-attendance, Winthrop University has issued a written policy regarding Professional Conference Behavioural Expectations: *"You are expected to attend the conference on every day for which you receive funding. Note that you have received funding to both present your research and engage in a professional experience. Attending other presentations and interacting with your colleagues at a conference are several of the most important reasons for going".* This conference attendance policy applies to undergraduate students who are paid by their institution and required to participate fully in conferences, and their supervisors or seniors have the role of enforcing regulations and checking on their attendance. The issue of students' non-attendance is reinforced with two scenarios drawn from Thompson et al. (2012). The authors emphasise the importance of ethical practice and academic responsibility, stating: "students who are sponsored to attend conferences have a professional obligation to attend," (p.544). The groups of students in their example are graduate teaching assistants and hold officer position in their local chapter. The authors explain that acts like an absence, or reporting 'another boring meeting' are viewed as unprofessional and disrespectful behaviour (p.541).

Different points of view are offered by other commentators. Castronova (2013,p66) argues, it is reasonable to drop the formal sessions entirely because "it is a truism among academics that most of the creative work at a conference happens outside the formal sessions, at social gatherings," (p.66). Many delegates are primarily motivated by networking opportunities at conferences. Lohan (2012) provides an example of one respondent who didn't make it to every session because the main goal behind her attendance was to catch up with her clients and colleagues in the conference destination (p.39). The author himself is also convinced that a contest of ideas and wonderful creativity is often sparked by different organisations and different voices at conferences. However, "this kind of thing usually doesn't just happen during the sessions. It happens in the in-between times. Over lunch, coffee, or even at times when you've skipped a session," (p.39). Therefore, some scholars express the view that skipping sessions can be purposeful.

Another reason for non-attendance may be related to health or affordability. In one example, some delegates reportedly skipped the meal and the networking opportunities associated with that event, because the conference organiser was "not providing (free) food," (McCurry, 2017). Another example includes delegates who leave the conference if they feel their physical and/or mental health is threatened (Gordon & Gledhill, 2018; Thompson et al., 2012). Rather than settle for an insignificant presentation that reduces mental resources, attendees sometimes choose to slip out (Gosling & Noordam, 2006, p87) or select to only participate in certain sessions (Sousa

& Clark, 2017,p1). Gosling and Noordam (2006) also suggest delegates may be tired from a packed program. They may lack energy, feel tired or exhausted and may choose to skip some of the program and use the time to relax or talk to others," (p.85).

Tight schedules and insufficient funds are common reasons for delegates to miss certain parts of a conference. For instance, some attendees have to "shave off the start and end of a day at conferences" in order to save time and avoid an extra overnight accommodation charge (Henderson et al., 2018,p24). Others give examples of sessions that were poorly attended because they were held late on a Friday afternoon (before the approaching weekend), at a venue far from the centre of the city (Semler & Cavanagh, 2014,p577). This echoes the concerns of Günther et al. (2015,p5,20) who looked at attendance patterns over different days of a conference. They found, "The highest numbers of attendees are observed on the second day (out of three) of the conference, in sessions in the late morning, [and] in the most convenient locations," (pp.5-20). The low levels of attendance experienced in the early morning or during the last time slot on the last day are described by presenters as the "graveyard slot", and those allocated those slots can feel devalued and less important (Henderson, 2019,p121).

There is clear evidence that conference organisers worry about the low attendance at the conference and wish to improve conference attendance by some means. It is remarkable, however, that most conference organisers do not make it clear that full-attendance is mandatory or at least highly encouraged. Further, we need to ask what can be counted as full-attendance for organisers? This research looks at full-attendance from one perspective only, that is, from a participant's perspective: having participated in all the conference programs (if there is a concurrent session, just going to one of them is counted). Further research will focus on conference organisers and planners, understanding their definition and expectation of attendance and non-attendance from different perspectives.

Non-attendance in the work context

The phenomenon of non-attendance is often applied to conference delegates, and also in the workplace. In the following section, the term 'non-attendance' is analysed by comparing employees and conference participants at different levels. The act of non-attendance in the context of the workplace has drawn some attention from scholars. In general, employees work at a comparatively fixed location for a relatively long period. Due to a contractual relationship, the organisation for which they work imposes constraints in the form of an attendance policy, and employees need to ask for approval in order to leave work before the scheduled time. Rewards for regular attendance, retaining job security (Biron, Brun, Ivers, & Cooper, 2006), upholding professional ethics (Collins & Cartwright, 2012), and exhibiting a strong sense of responsibility (Bierla, Huver, & Richard, 2013) are strong motivators for employees to attend work regularly. However, employees may also be under negative influences related to an unfavourable physical environment (Biron et al., 2006), social and economic pressures, legislative requirements, and compensation (D'Abate, 2005). These factors may lead to workers undermining organisational performance (Biron et al., 2006), procrastinating in regard to their work responsibilities, and as a result, negatively affect a company's profitability (D'Abate & Eddy, 2007). Moreover, interpersonal relationships within the organisation are seen to influence the likelihood of excessive absenteeism (Bamberger & Biron, 2007; Johns, 2011), particularly if managers at high levels do not set an example for other workers (Bierla, Huver, & Richard, 2011).

The concept of absenteeism has become a topic of interest to researchers. Absenteeism reflects employees' absence from the workplace. Nel (2013,p1) concludes that the detriments for business or industry caused by absenteeism includes disruption and production problems, customer dissatisfaction, financial loss and resentment among high performers. Depending on the duration of absence from duty, absenteeism is generally regarded as wither short-term or long-term. Considering conferences are only of a short duration, delegate non-attendance would be considered a short-term absence. This section therefore takes a closer look at short-term absences.

Instances of workplace absenteeism are managed differently depending on the circumstances. If employees have a compelling or unavoidable reason for missing a few days of work with permission, they are considered as incapacitated (innocent absenteeism). Examples of this type of absenteeism can be sickness, injury, and care-giving responsibilities at home. By contrast, an act of absenteeism that is performed by an employee intentionally and without authorisation of a valid reason is considered misconduct culpable absenteeism (Nel, 2013). Nel (2013,p7) lists a variety of common reasons for this type of absenteeism in the workplace, including "arriving late, leaving early, extended tea or lunch breaks, attending to private business during working hours, extended toilet breaks, feigned illness, and taking an undue length of time for carrying out duties." (p.7). Depending on the severity of the breach and the working hours missed, workplaces may act to deter such absences by giving oral or written warnings, deducting pay, implementing disciplinary punishments or dismissing employees (perhaps also offering avenues for appeal) (Dunn & Wilkinson, 2002).

When attempting to shift the concept of absenteeism from the workplace to the conference context, delegates' absenteeism is more complex and varied. As stated earlier, a conference can be considered part of one's work obligations. In this sense, it may be necessary to refer to absenteeism in the context of the conference, where it is suggested that conference attendance is an addition to one's work requirements. However, the conference is certainly not the complete workplace. It places delegates themselves in a temporary space and time, an interaction with the outer environment facilitated at a faster pace and more intensively, which differs from an employee's daily work tempo (Pels, 2003). More importantly, one of the prioritised aims for conference attendees is to establish relationships with potential professional partners or to maintain friendships with peers. Delegates are more likely to socialise in a relaxing and playful space rather than in formal sessions. As illustrated in Table 3, there are differing views on the issue of delegates missing conference sessions in the literature. In fact based on personal conference experiences, some authors [e.g. Gosling and Noordam (2006) and (Castronova, 2013)] question whether remaining engaged for the whole conference is in a delegate's best interest.

It is true that delegates might extend their lunch or tea breaks; however, the reason may be that they are meeting with potential research partners or sharing ideas and information with like-minded people in an informal gathering. Many researchers experience this with one accord. For instance, "discussion often take place by chance in the coffee break or during meals," (Sweeting & Hohl, 2015,p2), or "we have learned to adjust as individuals by spending more time inviting colleagues into informal dialogues over food, drinks, a walk or meeting in the lounge," (Graham & Kormanik, 2004,p392). "Breaks (coffee, lunch) were the most preferred occasion (to meet all kinds of people)" (De Vries & Pieters, 2007,p243). During the informal assembly, delegates may be stuck in conversations with someone from work and strive to fulfil the tasks assigned by their institutions. In this case, taking additional time to have a lunch or coffee break that leads to missing the next session(s) cannot be treated the same as wilful misconduct (absenteeism). Additionally, social events including formal gala dinners or informal gatherings are sometimes time-consuming and exhausting. Those social activities, especially the latter, involve more flexible forms of engagement that cannot be simply measured in terms of agreed-upon hours of work or hourly work output.

In the case of an organisation, the line manager has the responsibility of managing attendance issues and implementing human resource policies through day-to-day practices. Moreover, perfect attendance at work will be incentivised by many companies. In order to increase attendance, perfect-attendance bonuses, additional awards, and enhanced long-term promotion prospects as well as a sense of accomplishment may be utilised be employers. These encourage employees' regular attendance and the fulfilment of their contractual obligations (Collins & Cartwright, 2012). When it comes to conferences, it is rarely the case that delegates are closely watched by anyone or receive an admonition from their superiors for being absent. Meanwhile, they do not obtain rewards or bonus funds if they take part in the whole conference program. Absenteeism in an organisational context can be directly linked to reduced output, and can result in significant economic implications for businesses. But little research has been done on the implications (on reduced potential legacies) for delegates if the same phenomenon occurs in the context of a conference. Viewed collectively, whilst absenteeism in worksites and conferences may share some common features, research on absenteeism to date cannot fully explain why delegates registered for a conference miss formal sessions and/ or social events.

This thesis employs the concept of *non-attendance* to gain an understanding about attendees' actions at conferences and to suggest a corresponding theory. Drawing on various contextual differences (such as permanent versus temporary time-frames, fixed versus changing locations, and motivations), delegates' non-attendance appears to be quite distinct from that of employees. Accordingly, it may not be appropriate to rely upon organisational management output to analyse or explain the phenomenon of delegate's non-attendance. This further supports the selection of a grounded theory approach for the research.

2.4 Chapter summary

This chapter has provided a conceptual outline of crucial terms used throughout the thesis, namely, attendance and non-attendance at association conference. Prior to conducting fieldwork, no specific theories have been applied to frame the research. A comprehensive literature review (referred to as *theoretical sensitivity* in this chapter) is meant only to guide initial data gathering and inspire interview questions. Furthermore, a review of non-attendance in business or traditional workplace settings varies considerably from non-attendance patterns at conferences, and in different contexts or situational settings. For this reason, it may not be possible to apply theoretical knowledge from other disciplines to the conference context. Non-attendance in the context of conferences needs greater attention. Data gathering and analysis have been guided by a grounded theory methodology and are introduced in Chapter 3. A more complete understanding of attendance and non-attendance at conferences was realised after the fieldwork was completed and a literature review was then undertaken.

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

As this thesis is guided by grounded theory, the basic principles and research design are explained in the sections below. This chapter first describes the paradigm underpinning the research, followed by a discussion on ontological and epistemological perspectives, and a methodological approach. Then the author explains grounded theory, including variants of grounded theory developments, data collection and analysis under the guiding principles of grounded theory. The limitations of grounded theory and possible solutions are introduced in the final section.

3.2 Paradigm: ontological and epistemological positions

The researcher’s ontology, epistemology, and methodology are encompassed by a particular paradigm that determines the orientation of research and the school of thought (or practice) in which the researcher belongs. A philosophical position exits in everybody, whether exposed or obscure, which is reflected in their expression and helps them perceive the world (Collier, 1994). In academia such a philosophy is termed a paradigm, which presents a “basic set of beliefs that guides action,” throughout the course of the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008,p31). More specially, ontology, epistemology, methodology and axiology are four basic tenets of a paradigm (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Ontology shows how people view the world and is regarded as “the foundation of our approach to research,” (Henn, Weinstein, & Foard, 2006,p18). However, ways in which people view the world are more or less arbitrary with the influence of social interactions and the surroundings (Holstein & Gubrium, 2013). Further, the researcher’s own position is embodied in the course of the study (Veal & Burton, 2015). The choice of research design is also dependent upon the researcher's own knowledge of philosophy, value orientation, analytic strategies, and relative research fields (Birks & Mills, 2015; Wilson & Hutchinson, 1996).

The epistemological issue, which explores the relationship between the investigator and the study subjects, is impossible to be value-free and objective as it is rooted in positivistic and post-positivistic paradigms (Hardy, 2005). When it comes to the context of non-attendance, a subjective approach is better suited to this research. Some studies (Edwards et al., 2011; Mair, 2010; Oppermann & Chon, 1997; Ramirez et al., 2013; Rittichainuwat, Beck, & Lalopa, 2001; Severt et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2007) indicate there are individual differences between conference attendees, however, the same phenomenon may be interpreted divergently (Crotty, 1998). Accordingly, this study will give voice to all participants. Subjects being investigated are encouraged to provide their own explanation of their situation and see the phenomenon from their own perspective. For this reason, this research tends to have a more flexible approach to data collection, in order to fully explore the variety and complexity of conference delegate views, thoughts and experiences.

Such a flexible methodological approach would seek to determine respondents' constructions of reality; in other words the perception of reality as understood by the respondent would be then formed by the inquirer (Hardy, 2005,p114). Hardy's understanding is an example of a qualitative research worldview of social constructivism. Silverman (2006) holds the view that the cause of action can only be explained and understood after finding how people construct meaning and action. However, establishing exactly how a participant constructs meaning and action is actually a process of reconstructing on the part of the researcher. Essentially it is the process of elaborating on, or understanding an action by viewing it from the experiences of the participant. Instead of presupposing an approximate answer, the researcher immerses themselves in the relevant area of study and investigates without preconceived expectations. Once data is compared, results guide the researcher's interpretive understanding of social phenomenon and the meanings, as well as any 'fusion of horizons' through interactions between researcher and participant. In such a manner, social constructivism can be described as an inductive, qualitative process through which the inquirer presents the phenomenon based on exploration and examination of data acquired during fieldwork.

This research applies such a qualitative approach for two reasons. Firstly, a qualitative design is more appropriate where one is seeking to obtain a deep and rich understanding from a smaller number of respondents (Veal, 2006) It is particularly well suited to activities at events where a more 'personal' and in-depth exchange of views between researcher and participants is preferable and possible (Veal & Burton, 2015). Secondly, a qualitative methodology is advantageous in that it constitutes contextual knowledge and potential theory. As stated earlier, the factors affecting conference attendees who fail to participate fully in a conference have not yet been examined. All these issues pose challenges given the lack of empirical study and corresponding theory. In this regard, the phenomena and problems in practice can best be discovered through qualitative research, and substantive theory built by induction.

3.3 Grounded theory methodology

Grounded theory prioritises new understanding and perceptions of phenomena or problems, thus a better fit for fields where existing theoretical explanations are lacking (Suddaby, 2006), which is very much the case with this research. The concept of grounded theory was first presented in 1967 by Glaser and Strauss. Grounded theory is a methodology that summarises empirical generalisations from primary data, and constructs a theory system that builds on real data and actual phenomena from bottom to top, instead of deducing hypotheses with the current theories. However, there are some who contest the validity of the grounded theory approach (Morse et al., 2009) and countless versions have been put forward over the past 50 years. These versions generally sit within three competing schools of thought.

3.3.1 An overview of grounded theory

Glaser sticks to the traditional, objectivist grounded theory approach, and pays more attention to the data itself, rather than the process of generating data. He asserts that researchers do not have pre-set theoretical frameworks before data analysis, and all concepts, categories, and theories are emergent. At first, he believed there was no ‘basis for coding’, but later, he presented 18 coding families as guidance for researchers in coding analysis of primary empirical data (Glaser, 1978). Glaser follows traditional grounded theory data analysis strategy and divides coding into theoretical coding and substantive coding, with the latter further including open coding and selective coding.

Strauss and Corbin, however, emphasise that the problem should be solved in the actual situation; that solutions should be generated by figuring out a problem, and that only practice-rooted theories can solve practical problems. To help researchers better describe the research process, the authors draw their conclusions after analysing and sorting phenomena through induction (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). They divide coding into open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, and put forward a technical, analytic process, which has been widely accepted by researchers due to its practical guidance. But this technique has encountered fierce opposition from the traditional grounded theorists. Glaser argues that this method is standard-rigid-format, denying grounded theory's basic essence that data selection and theory formation should not be forced by conceiving a problem, or by proposing a concept, category or hypothesis in a preconceived manner (Glaser, 1992).

Glaser, Strauss and Corbin, supporters of objectivist grounded theory, attach great importance to the data itself, while Charmaz thinks more of the process of data generation and the construction of data sources. In this way, Charmaz proposes constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2008). Grounded theory offers a causal interpretation and is concerned with what kinds of actions exist and why such actions appear. Data may not be a sign of reality, the source from the experience shared or co-built by researchers and participants. Researchers are part of what is studied. Researchers will view the lives of participants inside the context in which the participants live. The participants' actions may also reveal differences among themselves. From such interactions with participants, researchers understand the position and situation they face, as well as their actions in such a context. Then, the researcher can interpret the meanings of their actions and construct the theory step by step. Such construction and analysis are situated in a certain period, space, culture, and environment. The whole research process is open, flowing, and inseparable from the researcher's participation in the process and their interaction with participants. Charmaz also claims that data analysis techniques provided by either Glaser or Strauss and Corbin are, in fact, just guiding principles, rather than a formative tool. Researchers should apply these techniques flexibly in research.

But beyond analytical methods, the role that theoretical sensitivity plays in grounded theory is highly controversial between the three schools of thought (Matteucci & Gnoth, 2017). Starting with Glaser (1978, 1992, 2002) again, the scholar preaches that researchers should set aside their personal and professional characteristics (which may obstruct research procedures), and begin the research without a preconceived attitude. In this way he firmly opposes a preliminary examination of literature and pre-existing knowledge, and suggests the researcher should be seen as a blank slate when starting the research. Strauss and Corbin (1990) hold a contrary opinion. They propose the researcher should maintain theoretical sensitivity through prior review of the literature and flexible use of existing wisdom to direct data gathering, stimulate questions for informants, and contribute to the analytical approach. Charmaz (2006, 2008, and 2014) agrees with Strauss and Corbin that both researchers and participants cannot be separated from their own world outlooks, standpoints and values. Researchers are not neutral in their use of principles due to their "perspectives, privileges, positions, interactions, and geographical and social locations," (Oliver, 2011,p377). Charmaz (2008) states professional researchers and graduate students have specific knowledge in their fields, which to some extent familiarises them with what will be done during the study. Regarding theoretical sensitivity, the researcher can take these vantage points' to focus on a particular aspect of the empirical world and guide analytical precision in further study. However, Charmaz (2006) also cautions that excessive concentration may be a risk factor for losing sight of other perspectives. It is important therefore to "remain as open as possible to whatever we see and sense in the early stages of the research," (Charmaz 2006, p.17). The application of theoretical sensitivity in grounded theory has gained widespread acceptance by many scholars (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Hardy, 2005; Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006; Selden, 2005; Suddaby, 2006). In this sense, the preliminary literature review on launching theoretical sensitivity regarding conferences and non-attendance was introduced in Chapter 2.

3.3.2 Constructivist principle of grounded theory

According to Daengbuppha, Hemmington, and Wilkes (2006,p385), the grounded theory approach is "rooted in the interpretive social-science paradigm, in which reality is assumed to be socially constructed and this reality does not exist independently, but is given subjective meaning by actors in a social setting." Constructing grounded theory methodology involves systematic but flexible guidelines, which help the researcher collect and analyse qualitative data and construct a relevant theory upon it (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 2003). In this regard, Wilson and Hollinshead (2015) affirm that the development of constructivist grounded theory provides social science researchers with more freedom and flexibility, which steers a new route for ontological, epistemological and methodological orientation in different disciplines.

The application of constructivist grounded theory exists within many disciplines including tourism studies (Jaruwan, Nigel, & Keith, 2006; Matteucci & Gnoth, 2017). In a review of the development of tourism studies, positivism and post-positivism are the mainstream of the western trend of thought (paradigm). This follows the quantitative-based research that has dominated travel and tourism-related publications for quite a long time (Ballantyne, Packer, & Axelsen, 2009; Jennings, 2007). The paradigmatic bias (Jennings & Junek, 2007) began to change in the 1990s. More qualitative inquiry was applied to tourism studies in order to gather detailed and comprehensive information of the tourist's view. The concept of the 'travel experience' emerged and widely applicable findings have resulted from the approach (Jennings & Junek, 2007; Wilson & Hollinshead, 2015). However, the grounded theory methodology is still only rarely used in tourism and hospitality research (Douglas, 2003; Hardy, 2005). As an innovative methodology and a tool to collect and analyse data, grounded theory offers "a new level of understanding to studies of tourists and their interactions with the tourist milieu," and "can generate explanations of events and relationships reflecting lived experiences on individuals, groups and processes central to the tourist experience," (Jennings & Junek, 2007p202). Two relevant trends are the growth in tourism academic journals published since 2005 and the increase in tourism research using constructivist grounded theory since 2011 (Matteucci & Gnoth, 2017). A possible explanation for this might be that constructivist grounded theory raises strong interest among scholars partly because they are influenced by Charmaz's famous work, which opens new opportunities for inquiry (Matteucci & Gnoth, 2017).

As a stream of tourism studies, this research is using the grounded theory from a constructivist approach regarding conference attendees, interpretivism in relation to theoretical perspectives, a variety of qualitative research methods, and an empirical study in the form of research. Research on the factors that influence attendees to fail to participate fully in the sessions has not been undertaken thus far. This research aligns with Charmaz (2014) constructivism version of grounded theory approach which is in line with the author's cognitive perspective and better suits the research question than the approaches of Glaser, Strauss and Corbin.

3.4 Grounded theory approach to collect and analyse data

Grounded theory explicitly provides a guideline that leads the researcher to process the conceptualisation and to pursue further data collection and analysis procedures (Fernández, 2004; Fontana & Prokos, 2007). Grounded theory creates more room for the researcher to gather a range of data, and in-depth qualitative interviewing is most frequently used (Allan, 2003; Goulding, 2005; Gubrium, Holstein, Marvasti, & McKinney, 2012; Pidgeon & Henwood, 1996). This chapter covers data collection and data analysis based on grounded theory methodology.

3.4.1 Data collection

In order to draw on rich data and absorb ideas, the research began with interviews. Face-to-face interviews are more likely to elicit rich, detailed responses and in-depth information (Allan, 2003). By utilising face-to-face interviews, the researcher will not only observe the setting and scenes but also keep an attentive eye on the interviewee's language, non-verbal communication and side commentary. It can also provide opportunities to clarify meaning when terms the researcher is not familiar with or phrases with special meaning for interviewees are used (Charmaz, 2014). A complete picture of non-attendance appeared premised on the possession of rich data, and strong 'grounded' data for theory building.

Unstructured interview strategy

Initially, an unstructured interview methodology was applied to gather the perspectives of academics who have attended conferences. Rather than a formal investigation, this kind of 'interview' is more like a 'casual conversation'. There are several advantages to using this unstructured interview strategy. First, an unstructured interview can be seen as a wide-ranging discussion covering many issues, and the data occurs more naturally than it does in other types of interviews (Fontana & Prokos, 2007). By doing unstructured, interactive interviews, the interviewees were able to speak out freely and share any issues relating specifically to their own stories about the latest conference they participated in or conferences they have attended in general. Second, the researcher knew the interviewee's identity, and she had an opportunity to ask questions exploring specific information according to the particular individual. Third, although the researcher could join in discussing the topic, she presented herself as neutral and non-judgemental; the flow of conversation and follow-up questions were based on the participants' answers about different aspects of their conference experiences. For this reason, the issue of the trustworthiness of the data which may arise in qualitative research may not be problematic for unstructured interviews where the responses largely relied on the interviewees (Arksey & Knight, 1999).

Unlike the unstructured interview in a general way, the interview carried out with grounded theory methodology limits the scope of the topics discussed in order to concentrate on progressing the search for particular data that contributes to the development of a theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2014). Further, the focus of the topic can be placed on interview questions to inspire detailed discussion of respondents' experiences of non-attendance and encourage them to share their unique stories (Morrison, 2014). Daengbuppha et al. (2006) add that 'subsequent interviews' can be shaped by the prior experience of data collection to accelerate the interview process. In this regard, topics which the researcher wanted participants to talk about were pre-formulated by a number of general topics (Morris, 2015). The researcher started with an area of interest and formed preliminary interview questions based on the prior knowledge acquired from Chapter 2. The researcher then encouraged interviewees to further expand upon their answers (Gubrium et al., 2012,p3). Interviewees guided the interview process, which meant the questions presented were varied and were tailored to suit the individual respondent and the situation being discussed (Cassell, 2015; Corbin & Morse, 2003).

Topics covered in the discussion included the participants' past conference experiences and their attitude towards attendance and non-attendance (for question examples, please see Appendix 1). The interviews comprised three parts. The first part collected the general data about participants' personal and professional background. Typical background information included gender, age group, institution, discipline, and career stage. Concerning academic conference attendees, this research focuses on the Australian context. In this sense, some demographics such as nationality and cultural background were not so important as long as participants were studying or working at an Australian university during the research period.

The second part began with interviewees' conference experience in general. During the interview, the participants were informed in advance that the conference involved in this research refers specifically to the association conference. Interview questions such as "Tell me about your first conference," and "Could you describe a typical day at your (most recent) conference," left participants open to narrating tales of experiences at conferences. This interview technique was suggested by Charmaz (1990,p1167) and is designed to "elicit the narrative of the respondent's story with only minimal framing by the researcher". The interviews were conducted with general open-ended questions. This open question technique prompts participants to speak freely, thus enabling the researcher to collect rich information (Fernández et al., 2007; Fontana & Prokos, 2007). By comparing the first conference with the most recent conference an interviewee had attended, the researcher was able to get an understanding of any differences between their current level of engagement at conferences and their past behaviour. In turn, this was hoped to be of use when evaluating how attendance might be impacted by the career stage a delegate was at.

The topics in part three were constructed as a result of personal opinions put forward during interviews. These included a participant's positive or negative experiences in relation to their conference motivation/personal goals, their specific reason(s) for being present or absent in sessions and social events, and the attitudes they held towards their attendance and non-attendance. By including a series of questions enquiring about interviewee's decisions and actions during the conference, the researcher gained an increasingly clear picture of:

- what factors might prompt them to participate in a particular conference program
- why unplanned (impromptu) non-attendance sometimes occurred
- what kind of activities participants chose to do instead of participating in the scheduled session and/or social event they had planned to attend.

Interviewees who had attended two or more association conferences were asked to compare their first and most recent attendance experiences. By following up with attendees before and after their conference experiences, the researcher sought to understand whether their actions or attitude were changed as their experience with conferences increased.

It is also necessary to investigate how delegates perceived their non-attendance. A question like “Do think there was some possibility that you missed conference benefits because you did not attend the session/social event” was added if the interviewee indicated they had chosen to miss part of a conference program. In this way the researcher was able to understand whether the academic understood what potential benefits they had forfeited for the sake of their non-attendance.

Previous research had also suggested external factors *may* have a particular impact on a delegate’s choice to be absent for some conference programs. Certain questions in Section Three (please see Appendix 1: Interview questions example) were further developed to find out, for instance, whether their attendance was influenced by conference destination or by those accompanying them on the trip (family, peers, or supervisors). As a supplement to the study of the non-attendance phenomenon as a whole, the participants were asked to discuss their perceptions regarding other people’s absences during the conference. As noted in Chapter 1, one of the objectives of this study was to find a word that could be used to describe an act where delegates leave the conference while the conference is in progress. The word that sparked in participant’s minds when thinking about their own absence or the absences of others occurred naturally in the conversation.

Parts four and five asked for suggestions about how to reduce delegate absences during conferences and included a question on how participants valued conferences. Finally, interviewees were allowed to give any final comments or raise any issues they considered to be of relevance to them or the research. Through triggering their memories, the researcher sought to expand on various aspects of their conference experiences. As the interview conversation evolved, experiences of attendance and non-attendance during conferences unfolded.

<u>Sampling strategy</u>

There were two types of interviewees recruited for the research. They were (1) PhD students and (2) academic staff at different stages in their career. The next section introduces the sampling strategy used and a discussion on how the interviewees were selected and invited to participate.

Interview participants

At the outset the researcher had a general concept of the type of candidates who would be appropriate to interview for this research. These sampling targets were gradually confirmed as the research proceeded. Qualitative research focuses on an interpretive understanding of participants in a meticulous and in-depth way, and it is neither possible nor necessary to use probability sampling. That is, sampling aims toward theory construction, not for population representativeness. Sampling, when guided by the purpose and research design, can filter participants that offer the maximum information related to the research question. Following on from this, the qualitative sampling of interviewees at the initial stage was based on purposive sampling to realise the horizontal comparison of conference attendees of different backgrounds.

The sample of interviewees consisted of PhD students and academics working at universities. PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) means "a research training" (Fry, Tress, & Tress, 2006, p194) . Although the first university in Australia was founded in the 1850s, local graduates faced the lack of higher education at the doctoral level and had to go to study in Britain or other European countries for research training until the University of Melbourne lead into PhD regulation in 1946 (Dobson, 2012; Rae, 2002). The PhD degree in other universities started in the nineteen fifties and developed rapidly from the early nineties. Today all thirty-nine Australian universities offer PhD degrees, which is the most common doctoral program accounting for around 100,000 degree awards (Bentley & Meek, 2018). The period of PhD candidature in Australia is typically three to four years full-time or six-to-eight-year part-time program.

However, there is no unified concept on career stage. According to Bosanquet, Mailey, Matthews, and Lodge (2017, p890) an early career academic (ECA) is defined in the following way: "Early career in academia is typically defined in terms of research capability in the five years following PhD completion, with career progression from post-doctoral appointment to tenure, promotion and beyond," (p.890). Other resources, for instance, Campbell, Micheli-Campbell, and Udyawer (2019) refer to ECAs as being those academics with fewer than five years in the field after completion of a PhD. In other contexts ECA may refer to academics who have worked for "up to approximately five years after graduation," (Ferguson & Wheat, 2015, p3). The point is there appearing to be no agreed definition of career stage in the same organisation. One of the most influential and authoritative institutes, the Australian Research Council (ARC), states "early career researchers [are] researchers within five years of the conferral of the PhD". However, the ARC's Australian Laureate Fellows Award defines an ECA as being one who is "0–7 years incl.

post-PhD". In considering the ambiguous definition as well as the situation that the career disruption or career track might be changed in different life-history stages, the researcher left the option open and self-defined to the participants (Matthews, Lodge, & Bosanquet, 2014). This suggests that academics at different career stages should be invited to take part in this research. According to career stages, the participants were categorised as PhD students and non-students, including early career academics (ECA), middle career academics (MCA), and late career academics (LCA). Together, participants were purposively chosen based upon various personal and professional characteristics including gender, discipline, and length of career and conference experience.

Previous research proposed that gender differences and discipline areas might play a role in conference attendance. Because of this, the author felt it was useful to examine how female and male academics across various disciplines felt while attending conferences and in what ways these feelings affected their participation. The International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA, 2013) shows that conferences centred on medical science, technology, science, industry, education, social sciences, economics and management. Given that this research investigates only association conference delegates, the industry sector has been excluded. Subsequently the target interviewees in this thesis were attendees from seven disciplines and roughly grouped by three categories: STM (science, technology and medical), ESS (education and social sciences), and BUS (economics and management) disciplines. Additionally, interviewees' multiple conference experiences seem to be closely linked to the length of their careers, which might result in different responses to the act of attendance.

Interview procedure

The interview was piloted with four PhD students and four academic staff from the three major disciplines identified above. The researcher was not that surprised to hear that all of them had refrained from attending conference sessions or social events at some time and it was only the details of the frequency with which they did that varied. For instance, the attendees, who took their spouses or family members to conferences, were more likely to spend time on tourism and leisure programs. They tended to "leave early" when their conference schedule clashed with their touring plans. There were those who have sought social interaction and were more focused on networking activities. Rather than sitting in the packed conference room, delegates were more inclined to set up outside the venue and make new friends and bonds with acquaintances. Another participant had to escape from an assembly room that was too chilly because of the air conditioning. Or someone had a temporary emergency, for instance, a sudden request for a working matter or phone call from family. Another possibility was that they were assigned to an important task to liaise with potential collaborators, therefore, they had to leave as soon as they met them at conferences. Some of them had exhausted themselves working. In this case, they simply skipped the following sessions.

Between April and October 2019, the data was acquired via unstructured face-to-face interviews (with the exception of one interview conducted by Skype at the interviewee's request). The sampling in this research was current PhDs and academic staff at Australian universities across three major disciplines. The methods of inviting each of the two groups of participants differed in a number of ways.

In the case of PhDs, the researcher attended several open workshops and social gatherings offered by targeted faculties at different universities to approach potential interviewees randomly. The majority of participants, therefore, were people the researcher met in person before the formal interview. They were given a basic idea of the aims of the study and invited to participate. The researcher also drew upon support from a number of interviewees who had agreed to be involved, by asking them to refer friends or associates who met the interview prerequisites and who might like to take part. This method of growing a sample size is commonly referred to as snowball sampling. The researcher benefited from "more knowledge, more analysis, and ultimately more understanding of others whose life experience were similar to mine" by doing research in her own setting, particular the study of PhD students as "my own kind" (Kanuha, 2000, p441). However, the author also stepped out of her role as an insider sharing a common institutional culture with participants and stood at the researcher's perspective to investigate those who were being researched and showed respect for diversity.

The majority of the interviews with PhDs took place in a reserved meeting room in the researcher's faculty, where both parties to the conversation could speak without interruption and where recording facilities were available. Three separate interviews took place in group study rooms in the library at various universities. The researcher spent between thirty minutes to one hour on each interview. Some PhDs offered additional information once the recording had been turned off and further explained their conference stories to the researcher via social media for up to a few days after the interview. With their permission, the complemented resources were added to the data in order to analyse their perspectives more fully.

Contact with academics at different stages in their career occurred differently and had a more focused strategy. The researcher believed the likelihood of finding willing participants from this group would be enhanced if they were familiar with the researcher. Accordingly, the researcher used various means to contact academic staff. Eventbrite (https://www.eventbrite.com.au/) is an event calendar displayed on the university's website and offers information which enables individuals to access activities arranged by different disciplines at different universities. The researcher obtained advanced knowledge of who would attend the events and checked their biography using university webpages, online staff directories and LinkedIn. Knowing an academic's identity would also help the researcher ask specific questions during the interview. By participating in social activities, free seminars and conferences held at different universities, the researcher met the potential interviewees in person, had opportunities to introduce the research, and asked whether they might be interested in being involved in the research. A reminder and interview invitation were then emailed to the academic. Many of the academics initially approached continued to give their consent to being involved for the duration of the study. In addition, mass mailing was sent to other academics who met the criteria to increase the numbers of participants. Snowball sampling was also applied in these cases.

The interviews with academics took place on a schedule and at locations suitable to the participant. Cassell (2015,p42) asserts "the interview location can have significant meaning for the interviewee" because it not only creates an environment that makes participants feel comfortable but also presents visual cues that convey a meaning of contextual data of interviewees (p.42). For this reason, carrying out the interview in the participants' working environment is encouraged, because it is conducive to the researcher's understanding of the issues that may trigger new questions. The interview schedule was pre-arranged, and the researcher was invited to visit academic staff in their office at their university. In the office, interviewees were stimulated by their working environments which might make them remember conference events and their unique situations. It was very impressive to see one male ECA and two male MCAs had actually filed the conference program booklets and made a folder of all conferences they had attended thus far. During the interview, they paged through the folder recalling events. For example, one MCA did a presentation at a conference, but his name and abstract was not shown in the booklet due to a printing error. He kept the program book as an example of it being an "unsatisfied and unforgettable conference experience" and explained in detail about the incidents that drove him to be absent in the session and social events. The printed material reminded him to reflect upon every single activity he undertook during that particular conference.

All interviews occurred in the academics' offices, with two exceptions. One female MCA preferred not to have the conversation in her office, which was an open and transparent space with other people walking by. She opted to sit in a café which was relatively private and made her felt more relaxed. One male MCA believed talking at home allowed him to express his opinion more freely; therefore, he wanted to use Skype to conduct the interview. The researcher responded favourably to their requests, carried out the interviews, and recorded the conversation in the ways they felt most comfortable. Each interview lasted from approximately half an hour and two hours.

Of particular note is the part culture played in the interview process. For example, in the culture of one of the male LCAs, people are more inclined to not talk about themselves or give a direct answer. Instead, they refer to the situations of other people, all the while actually discussing their own situation. In his case, the researcher raised specific questions rather than general questions, and gave other people as examples. This enabled the conversation to flow more naturally, and would then ask: "and how about you?" This kind of movement in the interview helped to dig for implicit meanings. One interesting event was when a male MCA asked that the recorder be turned off when he was explaining why he was absent at a particular conference. His request was agreed to, and after he had spoken freely (off the record) he gave the researcher permission to use the additional information in the study. The researcher noted his comments and incorporated them into the data analysis.

Taking the data-gathering process as a whole, the researcher approached participants for permission and then made an appointment with them to arrange the interview schedule. A Participant Information Sheet and an Informed Consent Form outlining the general information of the research and the purpose of the interview was enclosed in the email when sending the calendar invite. All those invited to take part in the investigation signed the consent form expressing agreement and handed it to the researcher prior to commencement of the interview.

A pilot study allowed the researcher to become familiar with the research setting, research procedures of data gathering, and interview techniques, which helped bring about research design and establish the basis for further formal fieldwork (Daengbuppha et al., 2006). When proceeding with the formal phase of data collection, the flow of the interviews was basically the same as for the informal interview examples. Although the researcher gained some basic ideas from the pilot study, the formal interviews were conducted without leading questions and the introduction of bias.

Whilst the focus of the research for both PhDs and academics was the same, there were some questions which differed for the two groups. For example, questions relating to the role a supervisor may have played in conference attendance was not relevant to academics interviewed, hence was only put to the PhD student respondents. Questions such as, “Did you receive any suggestions from your supervisor before you attended the conference?” or “Did your supervisor travel with you to the conference?” were tailored to investigate whether external forces had influenced the PhD’s performance at the conference. However, such questions were not relevant for academic staff, particular those who hold a senior position. The question was changed depending on how they participated – as a mentor or as a student. In this sense, the researcher did the pilot interview with two groups, that is, students and non-students.

All interviews were conducted in English, except for an interview with a male ECA who preferred to talk in Mandarin. The participant was recommended by the researcher’s colleague. About five minutes into the conversation, he proposed two options by saying that only a simple word would be delivered if the dialogue had to be carried out in English due to the language boundary. But he was very much pleased to provide the researcher with extensive information if he could respond in his native language of Mandarin. The researcher saw more value in the abundance of data and undertook the interview in the language the interviewee preferred to use. The recording was transcribed word for word in Chinese and then translated into English suitable for analysis.

There was no special technical equipment used to carry out this research, other than recording devices. A voice recorder was placed next to interviewees, and their answers were captured and analysed using digital file equipment. All interviews were recorded and transcribed soon after for coding. As described before, by means of interaction and interview between researcher and participants, large amounts of data were generated. At collection and analysis phase the data were managed using the qualitative software tool NVivo 12.

3.4.2 Data analysis

There are differences of opinion in terms of when a researcher should begin analysing data collected for the purpose of study. Some researchers (Allan, 2003; Ezzy, 2002; Gubrium et al., 2012; Morris, 2015) state analysis is possible as soon as the data emerges from the first interview. For this research project, early analysis was helpful in refining interview questions and forming new questions in relation to issues which were not originally apparent in the mind of the researcher.

Constant comparative methods and theoretical sampling are adopted by grounded theory to process data and then construct theory. First, grounded theory starts with a ‘bottom up’ coding approach. Morris (2015,p122) believes it is important to remain faithful to interviewees’ raw answers because their original language is “rich in meaning and imagery.” Allan (2003,p1) also notes that respondents repeatedly stress some words and phrases that highlight "an issue of importance or interest to the research”. He interprets such a process for construing words or phrases as coding. In light of this, the researcher kept the original text and the interview recordings were verbatim transcriptions. Errors in speaking including wrong verb tense, slips of the tongue, repeated words and stumbles remained intact. Some modal particles, which might echo or express support for what the speaker was talking about (“yeah”/” uh huh”/” Mmm”) were also retained. The advantages of retaining the response in their actual words were to:

- guarantee the authenticity and integrity of data
- avoid any chance of the researcher’s individual interpretation and meaning of certain terms incorrectly influencing results
- help other readers or examiners see the interviewee’s raw opinions, feelings and thoughts when doing the third-party validation.

Furthermore, Charmaz (2008) recommends coding on actions (referred to as ‘coding with gerunds’ in the original text) as much as possible when coding and writing memo. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, ‘coding with gerunds’ prompts the researcher to think about actions and processes, thus reflecting the purpose and actions of participants. This is thought to foster theoretical sensitivity. Secondly, it can prevent researchers from taking conceptual leaps and acceptance of existing theories before necessary analytical work starts. This is where grounded theory distinguishes from other methods, as it focuses on explaining what has actually occurred “in real life, rather than describing what should happen” (McCallin, 2003,p27). Accordingly, the interview transcripts were coded with gerunds. Some scholars (Allan, 2003; Selden, 2005) claim that the analysis of fragmented data, which may be picked up individually, is too scattered to connect from the context, speed effort, and time, ultimately losing the research focus. Rather than emphasising the “note”, the researcher values the “melody” in the coding process and pays attention to the connection between the lines; the relationship in context (Selden, 2005,p126). Instead of simply coding primary data word-by-word, this research process applied Charmaz (2014) line-by-line coding, which is a very detailed coding process where every code is a summary of each line.

With the guidance above, the data analysis started with the initial code. The researcher first browsed the interview transcript and made side notes where relevant before commencing analysis with NVivo. The scope of the code was not limited, and it could be either a word or a sentence. After comparing the most frequently used codes and some codes that deserved more attention, the researcher started to group and classify them. The name of the code was to reflect the NVivo code of the special term (terminology) and the meaning the participants wanted to express. Following this, the more correct name/term (derived from the literature or their professional background) was added. During this process the researcher kept an open mind and ensured there was no bias or imposition of their own will on interpretation of the data. After getting multiple codes, the researcher recognised that certain themes were emerging and established a set of themes to summarise like or related responses.

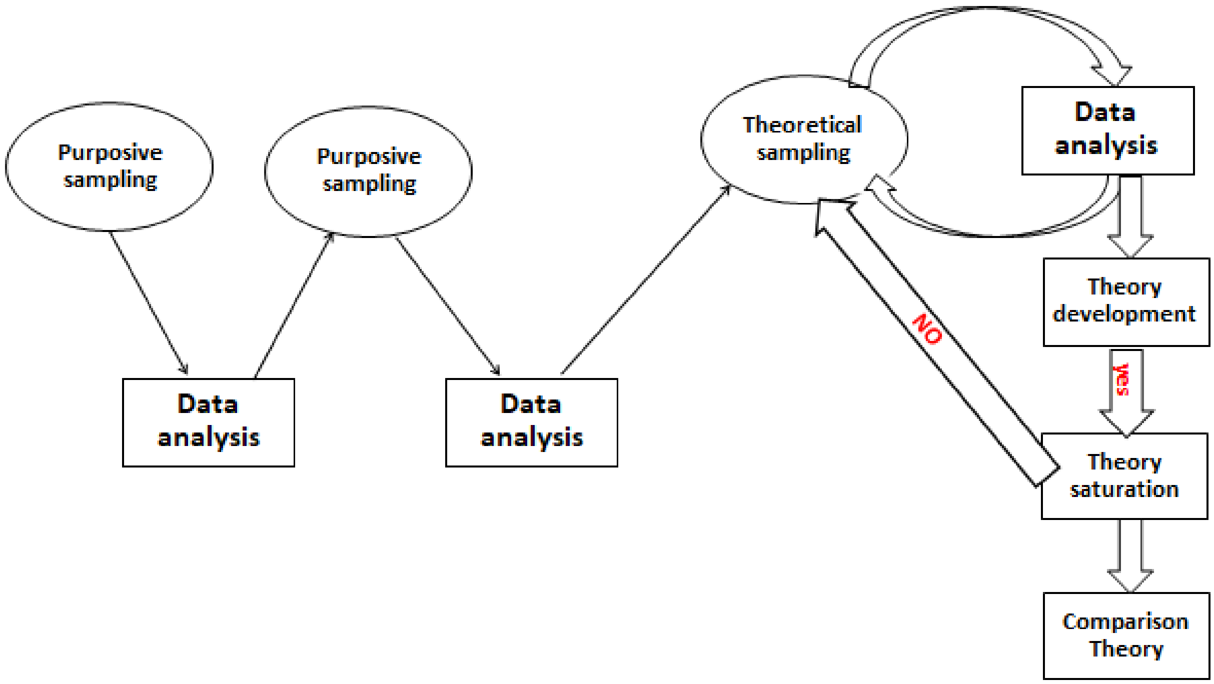
The next stage involved comparing and combining repeated or overlapping ideas to form initial concepts. Clustering of such concepts related to a certain phenomenon formed categories based on similarity, hierarchical, or causal relationships between concepts. Last, the concept-concept, concept-category, and category-category relations were analysed to construct a new theory. Collected data and analytical data appeared alternately and recycled in the research. Data richness was inspected from time to time in the process of analysis to fill any data gap. The process of theoretical sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached.

Theoretical sampling is generally used in a grounded theory approach (Cassell, 2015) and seeks significant data that continues to fill out the categories in all their complexity until no new ideas are emerging. Creswell (2018: 85) labels the simultaneous data collection in grounded theory as a zigzag process, where the researcher goes out to the field to gather information, then comes back "… into the office to analyse the data, back to the field to gather more information, into the office, and so forth." He successively estimated 20-30 interviews (Creswell, 1998,p56) and then 20-60 interviews (Creswell, 2018,p87) would achieve the saturation of data. Many scholars believe the total number of participants should not be set, and says identifying key participants to be interviewed hinges on what is most likely to enable theory development (Charmaz, 2014). In this study the researcher kept an open mind and adopted flexible methods to allow the continuous emergence of new concepts during the data collection process. This is in line with the approaches recommended by (Daengbuppha et al., 2006) and (Goulding, 2002). As the data was being collected, coded, and grouped into concepts, categories were developed. Subsequent samplings were theoretically selected and compared with those already examined (see Figure 1 below).

Theoretical memo

It is worth mentioning that a theoretical memo was employed to record the 'continuous process of comparison and conceptualisation' throughout the study period (Fernández, 2004,p50). Researchers needed to compare data, events, backgrounds and categories in order to generate categories by focusing on coding. The fragmented data were narrowed down into core variables which indicated the direction to collect and analyse further data. Apart from field notes, transcribing and coding, memos also included any relevant materials that the researcher writes, like thoughts on the interviews, methods and procedures of data analysis, and reflection on other issues. For instance, the additional information about the data might not be captured on the original data. What interviewees said afterwards (when the recording device was switched off) could contribute to the researcher's overall impression and some additional insights. Writing memos helped the researcher to construct methods of data classification through reflection.

Figure 1: The process of data collection and analysis using a grounded theory approach based on Charmaz (2014) and Creswell (2018)



The research with PhDs temporarily stopped after data was collected from 12 interviews (consisting of two female and two male participants in each discipline group). As a result, the difference in gender and discipline was not significant in the PhDs' conference experience. PhDs followed a similar general pattern when attending an association conference(s). In order to see if any fresh data could be collected, an additional interview was carried out in each group. However, nothing new happened to reveal their conference attendance and non-attendance; theoretical saturation was achieved within 15 interviews. Overall, eight female and seven male PhDs from seven disciplines (in three dimensions) at four Australian universities were recruited to participate in the interviews. Of the15 individuals, 14 were full-time students and one was a part-time student but in full-time employment and a mid-to-late career industry practitioner. The distribution of PhD interviewees (in terms of gender and discipline) is shown in Table 4, below. The excerpts are presented in Chapter 4 using anonymous quotes extracted from the interview transcripts, and the personal references are denoted by the discipline plus the gender and the serial number (for example, PhD_STMf1, PhD_BUSf2, PhD_ESSm2).

Table 4: PhD student interviews by gender and disciplines

Discipline	PhD student	
STM (Science, Technology, Medical)	Female	Male
	2	3
ESS (Education, Social Sciences)	Female	Male
	3	2
BUS (Economics, Management)	Female	Male
	3	2

Using the same process, the data collection for academics began with a purposive and snowball sampling strategy to seek the maximum variation, followed with a theoretical sampling technique. The initial sampling set was comprised of 19 academic staff across three major disciplines at four Australian universities. Theoretical saturation was achieved within 22 interviews in the final sampling set. The distribution of academics regarding gender, discipline, and length of career is shown in Table 5, below. The excerpts are presented in Chapter 4 using anonymous quotes extracted from the interview transcripts, and the personal references are denoted by the discipline plus the gender and the serial number (for example, ECA_STMf1, MCA_ESSm1, LCA_BUSf1).

Table 5: Academic staff interviews by gender, discipline and career stage

Discipline	Career Stage					
	ECA (Early career academic)		**MCA (Middle career academic)**		**LCA (Late career academic**	
STM (Science, Technology, Medical)	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
	2	2	1	2	-	2
ESS (Education,	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
	2	1	2	1	-	1

Social Sciences)						
BUS (Economics, Management)	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
	2	2	-	-	2	-

3.4.3 Ethical considerations

Ethical issues are an important element of the research process. To ensure that the research is reasonable and standardised, the university where the researcher is based adopted 'the principles of responsible research outlined in Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (the Code) to oversee the entire research process. In the submitted 'application for ethics and biosafety reviews', the researcher filled in contents such as the 'research background, brief introduction of literature, methodology and method, and how to protect research subjects from unnecessary harm' as required, and completed the risk assessment. Upon evaluation, the research neither involved animals nor targets sensitive people or asks sensitive topics. The only maximum possible harm would be 'one of discomfort'. Therefore, this research has been judged to be a low-risk case, and the final approval has been given by the Associate Dean (Research).

Since this research's primary subjects were current PhD students and academic staff, additional clarification is needed to protect this group. Therefore, the researcher has specified the reason 'why the use of the participation' in the application, and Dean has signed the corresponding research invitations. The research was carried out only after the 'Ethical approval' and 'Written consent from Dean-Nominee for use of staff and students' had been obtained. Interviewees were informed of the research content, received the Participant Information Sheet, and signed the Informed Consent For before being interviewed. The principal supervisor has played the role of chief investigator for the entire research process, made adjustments to the research based on any feedback or requests, kept and maintained the data to ensure that no personal conflicts of interests were touched in the research's conduct.

By analysing significant differences in delegates' participation in the conferences, the study exposed the issue of non-attendance that ultimately leads to different attendance patterns. However, it seems difficult to draw on a routine that is a true reflection of daily actions and involves personal whereabouts. Therefore, some of those interviewed might express reluctance to answer questions for reasons of individual privacy. The researcher showed respect for the participants by gaining their approval (through appropriately informed consent), and ensuring individual confidentiality. To ensure privacy, the names of respondents were not revealed; all identifying attributes were removed; and pseudonyms were used for the interviewees during the analysis process. Not only the names but also the corresponding positions of participants were disguised or changed in the transcript to protect the identity of the people who were involved.

Additionally, the researcher will keep the data secure and safeguard participants from any disclosure of their personal details. The data recorded on paper documents (e.g., memos and notes), is stored under lock and key at the office. Digitised research materials, audio recordings, interview transcripts are saved and backed up onto the researcher's own password-protected computer, laptop, and online data storage (i. e. Dropbox, Webmail account). Only authorised persons such as the researcher, the supervisors, and the examiners are allowed to access the encrypted data. The tool for data analysis NVivo also offers password protection, which may be a useful safeguard procedure. The data is stored as anonymous non-identifiable data. More specifically, all identifying attributes were removed, and pseudonyms were used for the interviewees and their institutions. Unless the participants specially requested otherwise, fictitious names were applied to all of the interviewees, and their individual information including personal identity and contact details are protected and not released to the public.

The researcher spoke informally and formally to PhD students and academic staff who had association conference(s) experience. Even though the researcher could count some of the participants in her circle of acquaintances, all were treated fairly and equally in terms of their participation in the research. That is, the research procedure was completely transparent and honest with the participants. None of them was subject to any pressure in deciding whether to take part in the study nor did they face any pressure to answer research questions. Neither individuals nor interested parties gave rise to any conflicts of their interests or suffered any harm. Due to being familiar with the interviewer, it is possible that some interviewees acted differently to those who were not familiar with the interviewer. This may be of some detriment to the 'naturalness' of the research setting however this impact will be minimal. Moreover, the participants might be unable to overcome certain worries when answering some questions. On this occasion, the researcher respected participants' independent choice and allowed them to decide whether to continue or break off the interview if they felt so compelled.

3.5 Limitations of grounded theory methodology

It should be noted that there are limitations associated with the constructivist grounded theory approach. One criticism is related to data validity (Daengbuppha et al., 2006). Constructivist grounded theory shares a connection with the researcher's theoretical sensitivity, as well as their educational backgrounds, employment records and living experiences. The author's discipline background and living experience absolutely influenced the data gathering and analysis process, which in turn might direct the theory constructed. In particular, the sampling selection was a purposeful activity under the guidance of a certain ideology and approach of investigation set by the researcher. Some of the moves might be clouded by the researcher's personal bias and preconceptions based on prior domain knowledge, and could potentially influence participants, forcing the emergence of data (Charmaz, 2014). In this regard, the problem of reliability might arise in unstructured interviews due to interview bias and effects (Cassell, 2015; Denscombe, 2014). For example, the researcher believed the interview questions would be understood by the interviewees as they are academics who have a wealth of research experience. Senior scholars who have had a long career might have a richer experience in attending conferences than junior lecturers and PhD students. These entry points were all based on the researcher's preconceived notions because the background of the interviewees has been known before the interview started. Furthermore, interviews could not entirely reproduce existing realities (Murphy & Dingwall, 2003; Silverman, 2000) as they are situational and negotiated, and construct or reconstruct the reality (Charmaz, 2008). Construction of theories by interview alone might cause loss of validity due to respondents' memory and the 'research effect'.

One way to minimise the possible implications of this is for the researcher to self-reflect and revisit the data gathering and analysis process periodically (Allan, 2003). With regard to this, the researcher maintained a continuing connection with key participants, seeking additional data where clarification was needed. Once a proposition was formed, the author would discuss this with participants and make follow-up calls when necessary. Feedback from participants helped to confirm whether the author's analysis represented the participants' thoughts faithfully. Primary data could be traced for any constructivist grounded theory and a duplicate test was possible to some extent, which added to the credibility of the research. In addition, the validity of the data was further guaranteed by peer review by means of checking the process of coding, reflexively through theoretical memo.

3.6 Chapter summary

This chapter began by describing the research paradigm and presenting the notion that the researcher's ontology informs the epistemology, which in turn shapes the application of methodology and the design methods employed in this study. This chapter reviews the discussion between the three representative schools of thought in relation to grounded theory and focuses on key aspects: analytical methods and theoretical sensitivity. In terms of constructivist principles, this research is subjective and engages the inductive research process and a qualitative approach. Interviews were employed as a data gathering technique in this investigation. Data collection and analysis were guided by Charmaz (2014) constructivist grounded theory. Finally, the chapter concluded by outlining the limitations of grounded theory.

4. Results and discussions

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents data gathered during interviews and highlights the relevance of comments to the key research topic, that being why association conference delegates may not participate fully in conference programs.

The interviews include references to examples of non-attendance by delegates at various stages of a conference and for various reasons. Rich descriptions of entire conference experiences, including discussion of emotions triggered by certain conference experiences, provide insight into motivations for attendance and non-attendance. There is also discussion of whether delegates perceive consequences will arise out of non-attendance, and the merits/weight they attribute to those consequences.

The discussion of the results is organised into three sections. The first section (4.2) presents the findings from the PhD student interviews, while the second (4.3) focuses on responses offered during interviews with academics at different career stages. The third section (4.4) compares and contrasts these results, identifying similarities and differences in attendance and non-attendance behaviours or motivations between the two groups.

Within each section, the narration of experiences and perceptions have been organised into three distinct stages:

Stage I: The motivations and inhibitors leading to conference attendance: what motivated attendance and what expectations did they have? Were there parts of the conference they did not plan on participating in?
Stage II: Conference experiences: what significant events occurred during the conference which influenced their decisions to participate or not participate in sessions or events? How did they express their non-attendance and what are their attitudes toward non-attendance (of themselves and others)?

Stage III: Reflections post-conference: how did/will the experience impact how they view conferences in the future (e. g. format and program) and suggestions for improving attendance.

Whilst the emphasis of this research is on non-attendance *during* conferences (Stage II), the motivations which prompted delegates to attend a particular conference in the first place (Stage

I) and their evolving evaluation (of the conference dynamic) after attending a conference (Stage III) were found to be contributing factors in many of the decisions interviewees made about attendance or non-attendance.

4.2 PhD students

Students at different stages of a PhD program were recruited from STM (science, technology, and medical), ESS (education and social sciences), and BUS (economics and management) disciplines. All PhD participants had been supported in their conference attendance by way of either financial support from their university or from their supervisor's discretionary research funds. Some first- and second-year students had attended multiple conferences, whereas others had only attended a conference during their final year of doctoral studies. These differences were attributed to different resource allocation policies at various schools, faculties and institutions. However, as a whole, a third of the students had only attended one conference.

4.2.1 Stage 1: Motivators and inhibitors impacting conference attendance

This section presents the factors that either motivated or inhibited PhD's conference attendance.

Motivations for attending

The reasons PhD students gave for attending an association conference represented both pull and push factors. These types of factors are commonly seen in research findings on conference motivations (Rittichainuwat, Beck, & Lalopa, 2001). Most students were pulled by external causes, including expectations from the institution. Some students were drawn because of the reputation of the conference and others were convinced to attend based on the encouragement of other people. The internal (push) factors were intrinsic motivations which drew them to attend, such as a desire to showcase their own research, getting the chance to learn, building up relationships or achieving other goals.

<u>External motivators</u>

① Expectation of the funding institution

PhD students' conference trip costs were usually covered by their university, with financial support coming from faculty scholarships and supervisor's project money or bursaries from other educational and cultural institutions. They believe the reasons their institution or mentors sent them to attend the conference during the course of their degree relates to their training.

> “I think it's just skill development. After attending a workshop, we got the basic or advanced skills in data analysis we needed. At the conferences, we showcase our current research and get feedback from the other researchers and the PhD candidates in the same area, and expand our knowledge. We also get a working opportunity. That's the main purpose, I guess,” (PhD_BUSf1).

> “I think it was designed as more of a professional development type experience. So, that [the conference] offers an opportunity for PhD students and early career researchers to kind of watch how this project was developing at that stage,” (PhD_ESSf2).

Some students were encouraged to attend conferences by their supervisors to network with peers or with colleagues “from other areas” (PhD_BUSf3). Nevertheless, more often, students just received a list of the conference details (PhD_STMm3) without any clear expectations being discussed, because mentors “expected that we already knew about it, because [the conferences on the list] is highly ranked. So, they expect we know everything too,” (PhD_STMm3).

A number of students did not know exactly (or even know at all) what their institution or supervisor’s expectation in terms of their conference outcome was.

> “I would say there were no expectations from the university. Um, well for [interviewee's department] funding, there is absolutely nothing. There is no condition at all,” (PhD_BUSm1).

> “So basically, they don't mind too much, especially when it's a domestic conference,” (PhD_STMm1).

The quotes above indicate that the specific expectations (if any) from graduate schools or faculties were unclear to the students. It is questionable whether conference opportunities could be leveraged when students only had vague ideas about their reason for attending the conference. This finding has some support in a previous study that suggested students “should be instructed as to the expectation of their instructor and what obligations they have during the time period of the conference,” (Thompson et al., 2012, p.544).

The other reasons students believed an institution would send them to a conference was to improve the university's reputation.

> "I think the reason is also a kind of way to promote [interviewee's university] or the [interviewee's faculty] particularly. It's a way for the other peer researchers to know what the PhD students or researchers are actually doing in the [interviewee's faculty]. It's a way to enhance [interviewee's university]'s reputation," (PhD_STMf1).

> "I believe that [universities] have some income and that it is used to invest in developing the university's influence and reputation in academia," (PhD_BUSm1).

Given the fact that attending conferences is costly and requires so much time and effort, (Rowe, 2018b) some question whether attending conferences is worthwhile for the individuals and their institution. Attendees hope to obtain recognition by making presentations at conferences, but the high expectation that comes with presentation may not be met. Even if presentations are delivered, there is no guarantee that they get an excellent opportunity for 'self-exposure' during or after the conference. The other question is how student delegates can expect to derive enough value from the conference to justify the costs of attending, if they fail to participate fully or leave the conference before it concludes. If nothing else, their visibility and institutional exposure is less if they are not in attendance.

② Being attracted by the conference reputation

Faced with a choice of numerous association conferences, the reputation of the conference within the field is an important selection criterion. About half of all students commented that they only applied for the "famous", "highly ranked", "A-star" conferences because they felt the quality of the conference could be guaranteed by having more keynotes under the name of "leading conference in the area". Therefore, they aimed at this kind of "recognised conference". Sometimes a list of MUST ATTEND conferences was offered by their supervisor.

> "Generally, people follow A-star and A-rank conferences, but sometimes there will be also new things coming up, like new areas of research. So, if it is organised by some head of people, then I feel they are good conferences," (PhD_STMm3).

According to Rogers and Davidson (2016) conference attendees nowadays are seen to be more discriminating. For example, delegates are critical of the choice of speakers (Rogers & Davidson, 2016). A prospective delegate may refuse to attend a conference on the grounds of disappointing keynote speakers on the programming list. In most instances, inviting speakers and peers with a good reputation (Maitland, 1996) establishes a strong position in attracting attendees when planning conferences and crafting marketing strategies. In addition, cross-discipline experts disrupt the old views of the established industry and introduce a fresh vision (Borden, 2017). Conference organisers welcome creative presenters that inject new vitality and bring current topics into conferences.

③ Being asked by others

Students felt honoured and pleased if they were offered the opportunity by other associations to give a presentation at the conference.

> “I've been invited to speak at conferences because of my job,” (PhD_ESSm2).

> “The conference chair gave me a fellowship to attend the conference,” (PhD_STMm3).

While none of the students took a conference trip at their own expense, the funds from their institutions were insufficient to support multiple domestic and international conferences. To improve the chances of attending more conferences, some students proactively sought opportunities to expand their network and get sponsored by other channels. Attending the conference further increases their exposure and has the potential to create a virtuous cycle to be invited to attend more conferences.

Intrinsic motivators

Most students interviewed had attended the conference(s) because of intrinsic motivations. These included showcasing their research, being able to learn and having opportunities to build relationships. These three motivations were expressed by all interviewees.

① Showcasing their research

To give an oral or poster presentation at a conference is often the precondition required for funding by many university departments or schools (Mair et al., 2018; Ravn & Elsborg, 2011; Rowe, 2018a). This requirement may go some way toward explaining why students made the presentation one of their primary goals. One student stated that the benefit of presenting a paper was to enable them to “summarise the work they do,” (PhD_STMf2) and enabled them to “practice skills for the future”. Her comment reflects the opinion of many interviewees. Her research began as rough data with a considerably lengthy piece of script. However, to create a better presentation, she had to make her document brief and to the point, which prompted her to rearrange data and review her work. It also motivated her to rehearse what she was going to say, which in turn gave her greater insight and understanding of her research.

② Opportunities to learn

As students, many interviewees stated they enjoyed being in a scholarly environment and cherished every opportunity for learning during the conference, including exchanging information, receiving feedback, and acquiring new knowledge. PhD_STMf1, in reflecting on exchanging information, noted that the research resource in her “small department with fewer members” were scarce. They felt an intense need to conduct exchanges with other institutions. To seek advice and look for inspiration, she and her colleagues went to the annual conference held in a first-class university with excellent research outputs.

Students made a range of comments in relation to ways they learned at conferences. These included appreciation for opportunities to “collect some feedback”, “refresh myself with previous knowledge”, “have a better sense of the research they are doing now”, and “have insight” into research gained by others by way of “watching and learning” at the conference. One student from ESS discipline provided a specific example. Her research was progressing slowly and remained at a conceptual phase. While presenting the relatively vague research concept she had developed, and receiving feedback from others at the conference, she suddenly “saw the light” and became much clearer about her future research direction,” (PhD_ESSf2). This serendipity of learning (Hopwood, 2010) was also highlighted in the responses of other interviewees, for example:

> “We just wanted to go to the conference to see what other people were talking about. It was more about absorbing, absorbing what the research was… So, I think the main purpose for me to attend the November conference was to make my [research interest] fresh again, to get my research going”, (PhD_ESSf3).

Those students who had only attended one conference indicated the experience had been somewhat of a tentative adventure, aimed at finding out what the conference experience as a whole was like.

> “This is quite a good experience to let me know about how a conference looks like and how should I prepare to better engage in the conference in the future,” (PhD_BUSm2).

Another insightful comment (from PhD_ESSm2) was:

> “We have a responsibility to share the knowledge in a format that will benefit other people”.

In the sense of learning and sharing, they stressed that conference programs - including invited experts - were more important than other attributes (such as conference destination, facility and service).

③ Building relationships

Participants viewed a conference as a platform for meeting people and getting help and opportunities. As students reflected upon the factors that drove them to the conference, they noted the importance of the particular conference’s reputation and how well-known the speakers and other notable delegates were. Many were excited about attending conferences which showcased “people that I had cited”. They were intrigued by being able to listen to the “big names” whose work they had read in renowned journals, and hoped to learn or advance their research as a result of having contact with them. This finding is in line with other conference research which has found that making professional contacts at the events is a significant pull factor for attendance (Mair et al., 2018).

> “Before I attended the session, I knew the organiser. He was a very important academic figure in my field, so I just wanted to take this opportunity to really meet this professor, to get to know his studies. So that was the main purpose,” (PhD_ESSf3).

> “I tried to find a big guy and take some pictures with him …He was the big hero of our area. He was really, really popular…And what was interesting is that you were looking for a particular guy in the conference,” (PhD_STMm2).

Having the chance to meet up with past friends (whether prearranged or by chance) was another attractive motivator for attending a conference.

> "Then I met a couple of people there. I didn't expect to see them there, but it was good to see them there, they were just friends from previous studies," (PhD_BUSf1).

In addition to meeting people, almost half the students interviewed believed delegates were more approachable under the environment of the conference, particular in the social events. A good example of the results is provided (by PhD_STMf1):

> "A lot of times people are much nicer there... I mean if you're talking to an officer they're not in their uniform, they're more approachable. But of course, when they are in their office space or in their professional times, they're not going to be that nice to you. They're not going to be like, 'Hey, what's up?' No. They're going to have to be very professional, so, it's a different climate. Like I said when you go to conferences, people are just more relaxed, they let their hair down, they're more approachable, and that's what you need. So, they're all big people, but they're just nice about it. They're like, 'don't worry you can call me by my first name. It's all good.' So, I kind of like that. I've enjoyed every single conference that I've gone to," (PhD_STMf1).

During the conference, students said they often tried to seek help from others and took opportunities to build collaborations, develop employment opportunities and attract resources, similar to the behaviours identified in previous research (Fakunle et al., 2019). An example of how a conference provides valuable depth to a PhD's career was noted by PhD_STMm1. This student approached the third year of their PhD candidature and hoped to get a position in the near future.

> "I tried to speak to the head of every single university I'd like to be employed by at some point in the conference. I feel like if they do remember me a little bit, it will be nice," (PhD_STMm1).

Along with many others, he believed strongly in the importance of collaboration.

> "We are of course supposed to make connections to get that golden work collaboration. And if we have plenty of collaborations, we've done our job correctly…So I had a good time going out there and talking with everyone and buying the right person the right beer and then you get the collaboration sort of a thing," (PhD_STMm1).

The chance to collaborate refers not only to joint projects with overseas universities or trans-boundary cooperation with industry, but also to those colleagues who are at the same institution but who work in a different department. In this sense, the conference bridges the gap between unfamiliar parties and makes conversations easier (Edwards et al., 2017).

④ Achieving other goals

A number of other intrinsic goals were noted by some interviewees. By attending the conference, some students explained they felt they would increase their visibility in the field. Others stated they felt they would become more confident. Being visible is signified by many interviewees who used words such as “showcase my research”, “present myself as a researcher”, and “need to be in my own reputation in academia”. They put much emphasis on opportunities for cooperation and employment, which corresponds with comments above, but they tied such benefits to things like knowing their conference experience would help make their resume “look good” (PhD_ESSf1).

Along with a number of other interviewees, PhD_STMf1 commented on the confidence she obtained.

> “I would definitely say just talking to experts, getting out of your shell, just being more confident about yourself.”

Or as PhD_ESSm2 put it, although they still felt tense standing in a crowd sometimes, their “confidence level” improved gradually because “I'm more aware of myself.”

These findings depict the importance of conference participation for students as seen by Wood et al., in particular the role they play in developing competence and confidence (Wood et al., 2017).

While a majority of participants placed more importance on the conference program than the destination, the destination was shown to have some impact on conference selection. More than half the students interviewed took the conference opportunity to explore the conference destination, particularly when the destination was overseas. The other appealing thing was to drop in on experts or visit family members or friends in the conference destination. Finally, some used conferences as a way to have a break from busy life and to enjoy the conference journey, which aligns with the findings of (Malek et al., 2011). According to PhD_BUSm2:

> "Attending conferences gives you the opportunity to travel. Studying as a PhD student is a quite long and hard way to go. And attending a conference gives you like a break to take an opportunity to see different parts of the world, to talk to many people. [It] makes your life a little bit colourful," (PhD_BUSm2).

Many participants explained there were links between the conference destination and their conference choice. The examples below mirror PhD's perception on the destination.

> "I think there is like a really high correlation. Last year I had couple of options in terms of going to conferences. I had one in Cairns and I had one in Auckland but I had already been to Cairns. I'd never been to Auckland and I have always loved New Zealand, so I chose the latter one. Well, that wasn't the only factor, I looked forward to attending the conference, but I also looked forward to a little bit of traveling after the conference in New Zealand," (PhD_BUSm1).

> "If the destination is appealing, then I would feel more interested in going there…I'm quite lazy now, so I'm not such an avid traveller anymore. I think now I prefer to go to places that are closer to my home. The trip to Northern Europe took like more than 20 hours on the plane and now I'm lazy to do that. That's why the destination is something I would consider," (PhD_BUSf3).

In summary, the main motivations expressed by student interviewees for attending a conference are showcasing their research, having opportunities to learn and building relationships. Other motivators were increasing visibility in the field, gaining confidence and exploring the conference destination. Similar results were found in the previous research such as that of Yoo and Chon (2008) and Kordts - Freudinger et al. (2017) who demonstrated that professional education, networking, and personal interaction were principal reasons for students to attend conferences.

Inhibitors to attending

Although students expressed much interest in attending conferences, they attended fewer than two or three conferences per year. The problems arising from limited funds and the time-consuming nature of travel were noted as inhibiting factors impacting conference attendance.

> "Now I'm not willing to spend money. I'd probably say [interviewee's location] or [other Australian city] is ok probably, if I could also arrange a trip; but otherwise yeah, very much geographically a small space I'd be looking at," (PhD_ESSf2).

> "If it's overseas, it takes about a week or so. Then maybe like two or three days to travel here and there. So, at the end of the day, you're losing a lot of time in attending conferences. And if you have a lot of research work that you need to finish up, especially for sciences, like experiments – well all that is just going to be delayed until you come back and get started. I try not to do too many conferences because it can get a bit overwhelming. It's good, but two or three should be more than enough," (PhD_STMf1).

Most Australian universities are under the administration of their state parliament; however, funding comes mainly from the federal government, students' tuition fees and social donations. Funds spent developing PhDs' research increases annually, however resources are limited and allocations for conference attendance cannot meet all costs. This supports the finding of Fakunle et al. (2019) which stated budget constraints and available time are the major limitations preventing students from attending more conferences. A small group of people expressed a belief they could lose time and attention by attending too many conferences. In this sense, two or three conferences during the study period were considered ideal numbers.

Pre-planning and scheduling

Linked to motivation, some participants drew up a plan to skip sessions and social events according to their own schedule and 'personal goals' before the conference started. For instance, in order to achieve what he wanted to from the conference, PhD_ESSm2 devised his own strategy:

> "…my approach, if I go to a conference, is very strategic. I read the program, and think this is the person I want to meet, and this is what I want to get out of this."

Therefore, six months prior to the conference he sent invitations to people he knew he wanted to meet, seeking appointments with them at the event. This strategic approach was reflective of that taken by many of the interviewees, many of whom said they browsed through the conference program before attending, highlighting the activities they were interested in or which they believed would be helpful to their development. They then made their arrangements around that revised personal schedule. Those sessions considered unnecessary were discarded in advance, meaning the decision to be absent from that segment of the conference was pre-planned. Many others said some decisions about whether to go or not to go to a particular session or social event were made before travelling to the conference whilst others were made “on the spot”.

4.2.2 Stage 2: PhD students’ attendance at conference(s)

This section explains the reasons that underpin attendance. Only a tiny proportion of the students interviewed took part in the whole conference, with most choosing to only participate in particular sessions or social events.

Participating fully in the conference

The PhD students interviewed stated they only attended all sessions offered at the conference if they were perceived to be good value or that they would meet a particular student goal. Others who were attending the conference for the first time said they stayed as long as they were being treated well and were receiving good food and service. Also, the manner of the attendance was driven by other personal considerations, including concerns over appearing impolite if they walked out.

> “I attended everything and there were probably only about 15 people in the room maximum. So, it would have been noticed if you weren't there. I couldn't leave the session; it would have been rude to certain people,” (PhD_ESSf2).

They also stated there were times they stayed not out of choice, but because they were watched. PhD_ESSm1 made the point of an involuntary attendance response to the other’s influence.

> “Because at that time, my master supervisor was there, I was a little more, how to say, (obliged) to attend all those events with him,” (PhD_ESSm1).

Even if they remained in the conference room, they might do other things. In the example given by PhD_ESSm1, he felt it would be “inconvenient” to leave in the middle of a podium presentation in full view of the public because he was sitting in front. Therefore, he decided to stay in the place but chatted with his colleagues online and played mobile games. The situation also happened to PhD_ESSf3:

> "I usually wouldn't leave, out of politeness. I may just do something else; check [social media], do my own computer work, and things like that. But I usually wouldn't leave, unless I have a very good reason," (PhD_ESSf3).

PhD_BUS2f also remained in sessions she was not particularly interested in listening to, because as she put it, the formal session was regarded as the best place to have a rest after a busy schedule.

> "One of the reasons I attended the full workshops, I guess, was because I felt really relaxed when I attended the workshops. Because I just needed to sit there and listen, and sometimes, I may not even listen to them. I'd just sit there. As I mentioned, I arranged a lot of meetings with [collaborators], so I needed to, speak a lot during the break sessions. So, I think the official sessions, the workshops, and the panel discussions were the best time for me to have a rest," (PhD_BUSf1).

On the whole, the results indicated it was very rare for students to attend a full conference program. Even those students who stayed in the conference room out of politeness or obligation occupied themselves in other ways, meaning they did not place high importance on internalising the presenter's words. This raises more questions about whether potential conference outcomes and legacies are being realised as a result of non-attendance, given that physical attendance may not always equate with engagement with content.

Choosing to participate in a particular conference session

Most of the time, students selected a session or an event to participate in based on their interests or its relevance to their research area. In many cases they stated that presentations tailored toward their research field were much more absorbing

> "I attended some, obviously the ones that are directly related to my work," (PhD_ESSm2).

However, there were also some who enjoyed participating in sessions that were quite different to the areas they were working on. PhD_STMm3 said that as well as listening to speakers from his own field, he visited sessions which were "not related to anything in my area of research, but it's interesting (because) one day maybe who knows, everything is like convergence."

As Cassar et al. (2020) noted, the quality of the conference program is crucial to delegate attendance, many students in this research project stated they preferred the sessions that were given by an influential keynote.

> “The best expectation I had before is to see the real hero in our research area,” (PhD_STMm2).

> “So there were a few talks that I really wanted to see. People who were quite prominent in the field and who specifically worked in my area. (PhD_STMm1)

In addition, they showed their willingness to provide support and participate in sessions delivered by friends or colleagues.

> “I couldn't attend [every session every day]; it was a four-day conference. But I could only attend maybe one or two sessions that my close friends were presenting,” (PhD_STMf1).

> “I didn't attend except for one that was not related to my area, but that was presented by my colleague,” (PhD_BUSf3).

One student was sent by his supervisor to attend a certain conference. Since he had only recently commenced his PhD, he did not know either his major or the details of the conference, therefore, he chose to go wherever the crowd was.

> “Because I had no idea which tutorial to go, I just followed my lab-mates to go to the first few tutorials in the morning … For the other three tutorials, I just followed the other people,” (PhD_STMm2).

Even more common were responses where students had only participated in the session in which they were presenting their research.

> “I only attended the one I was assigned to,” (PhD_ESSf1).

In a study by Mair et al. (2018) the need to present at a conference was seen as an external motivator for PhD students to attend. Presenting at a conference is often a requirement of the entity providing the students’ funding, and a number of the students in this research indicated they participated only in their own presentation.

> "Actually, I've only been to two sessions [in the entire conference]. One of them is the session I had to give my presentation in. For that, of course I had to be there. And the session before that, I was in the same room, listening to other presentations," (PhD_STMf2).

Of the students interviewed, only a handful had participated in the whole conference. With such minimal full-attendance, it might be argued that the full value of the conference was not leveraged. For most participants, sessions were only attractive enough to keep them there if the topic was interesting, related to their research field, or given by a well-known presenter, themselves or a friend or colleague. In fact, more than half the participants interviewed said they chose to only participated in their own presentation. It was also clear that students' attendance patterns during the conference were closely related to their conference motivations.

4.2.3 Stage 2: PhD students' non-attendance at conference(s)

This part focuses on the factors that reduced participation in the full conference program, the ways in which non-attendance was expressed and the students' perceptions about non-attendance. It was found that it was common for students to be absent from formal sessions and social events.

Being absent from formal sessions

According to interview responses, being absent from conference sessions is a widespread phenomenon. The main reasons for this phenomenon are a lack of student interest in topics, their physical and psychological exhaustion, their time being occupied by other more important things and the influence of others.

① Lack of interest in topic

The most common reason given for not attending a formal session was that the presentation was perceived to be 'not interesting' or 'irrelevant to their research area'.

In some cases, participants experienced less interest where the conference covered too broad a range of research streams. PhD_STMm2 expressed a view that was shared by many interviewees:

> "There were so many research [areas] I didn't know. Even though I was there, I could not understand them, so I didn't go there."

Some based their attendance or non-attendance decisions in the later parts of the conference with the experiences (and associated feelings) they'd had in the earlier sessions.

> "[I didn't attend] because I just got bored to be honest. After two days I had a kind of taste of the conference and pretty much knew, like, what the conference was all about," (PhD_BUSm1).

Acknowledging previous conference experiences (either whole previous conferences or earlier days/sessions of the same conference), another factor at play is that students chase time and efficiency. Event attendees will fairly quickly establish an idea of the standard of a conference and may find some of the programs do not meet their expectations. They may question, therefore, whether devoting more time (to participate fully) is worth it. Like PhD_BUSm1, some participants made decisions about whether or not to participate in a session because at some point they perceived the conference might be not consistent with their needs or goals. This is also exemplified in work undertaken by Lohan (2012) who suggested he would tentatively participate in a session in the first few minutes to see whether the session was worth staying for, then "make an informed choice about whether to stay or go" (p.39). Further, he strongly believes that most of the benefits delegates derive from conferences are not directly related to the sessions themselves.

Whilst delegates may make a judgement about a particular session before they go to a conference, they may also make trade-offs during the conference if their expectations are not being met. They may also rearrange things at the conference if they do not see value in what a formal session is offering, particularly when a schedule conflicts with opportunities that have arisen for networking or other development.

② Conference fatigue

Some participants referred to the physical and mental fatigue that drove them to pause for breath from a tense schedule. As PhD_STMf1 commented,

> "All the ones that I've been to are like three to four days, so it's very exhausting. And the break sessions are like half an hour, maybe 15 or 20 minutes, then they ring the bell and then you go back. It's a bit like school. Okay now is when you eat and talk. Okay now you're done and go back and present, things like that. So, I found it a bit claustrophobic, because I like freedom to do what I want," (PhD_STMf1).

Because most conferences last several days, delegates indicated that it would cause them a certain degree of physical or mental fatigue if they participated in all sessions. Students represented by PhD_STMf1 believed that participating in sessions one by one could be comparable to attending every classes at school which made them felt drained. Going in and out of conference rooms with the bell ringing mechanically, one will lose a lot of the fun brought initially by attending the conference and will result in exhaustion. Therefore, delegates are vehemently opposed to such a step-by-step approach, hoping to participate with freedom in the activities that interest them. Additionally, the plan set before the conference forces them to balance their daily schedule, allocating the time they would have spent attending the conference to other activities.

③ Competing priorities

In response to other factors that drove them to not attend fully, “having other priorities at the moment” was noted by several participants. They either sought to achieve their personal goals or had to go back for work. This was especially the case for those people who attended the conference in their home city but were overwhelmed with the work they still needed to complete.

> “Because I work full time, I had to go back (to work). On the fourth day I went to one session that I really wanted to attend for two hours and then had to go back to work,” (PhD_ESSm2).

As mentioned before, one of the biggest motivations for PhD students to attend conferences was to showcase their research and present their paper (Mair et al., 2018). To facilitate this, some participants stated they had to skip sessions and go back to their room to “do the preparation work for my presentation,” (PhD_BUSf1). After they have presented, the pressure is released, however for some, this too resulted in non-attendance, because they were driven by a need to celebrate and relax. As one student put it:

> “(It was) like a big stone had been lifted off me, and that's when I felt super hungry, and I wanted to have fun. And I just want to enjoy myself and hang out with my friends in (the conference destination),” (PhD_STMf1).

Some students found that when the conference was uninteresting (pushing them away) and the external environment was attracting them (a pull factor) they were being drawn to experiences outside the conference rooms.

> “Mostly because there weren’t any sessions that I wanted to attend, that’s the first thing. That's the push factor. And the pull factor is that like, because I wasn't interested and I found something else to do outside,” (PhD_BUSf3).

It concretely reflects in their exploration of the conference destination and a trip with friends.

> “I went to sightseeing in Melbourne, because this conference is uh, yeah, I didn't mention that. This conference is held in Melbourne. So the second day, I went out with some of my colleagues, and some of my friends. We went on a sightseeing trip,” (PhD_BUSf2).

These comments raise the question of how much influence a conference destination has upon attendance. On the one hand, a conference held in a delegate’s home city may limit attendance because the delegate is continuing to carry out their usual work/personal commitments. But on the other hand, if it is in an unfamiliar city, perhaps the temptation to visit new sights will pull delegates from conference sessions they see as being of less interest or relevance to them. Severt et al. (2007) considered this issue, finding that whilst the destination is less attractive to local participants, their attendance is often still impacted because they can easily travel between the conference and their workplace on the same day and that their work commitments take priority when choosing which conference sessions to participate in. They also found that non-local participants can find it hard to resist the temptation to go sightseeing.

In addition, students valued the informal learning they acquired at conferences. Rather than listening to the presentation, they preferred to walk out the conference room and start an informal conversation, which allowed them to express freely and gain knowledge in a relaxed atmosphere. This is in line with Castronova (2013) research which found academics were more willing to learn informally over coffee breaks or in a relaxed and pleasant environment. In addition, one of the primary goals for PhDs was to build up relationships with people in the field. However, they believed that such networking opportunities could not be directly realised through conference content (see Vega and Connell (2007) cited in Rowe (2018a).

> “I couldn't remember half of what people were saying in their presentations but I definitely remember talking to them outside during events, which was probably more important than anything else. “(PhD_STMm1)

This corresponds with Gosling and Noordam (2006) who hold the view that coffee and meals breaks are equally (or even more) important to the presentation, and during this time the attendees can participate in informal discussions and develop a wide range of social activities. This is the reason that a small gathering (with less number of delegates) is favourable to create a receptive environment for locating new contacts (Gilmartin & Gnjidic, 2017). The chance is high that delegates will not return to the session after a short break or coffee away, which may result in delegates' absence in the next session (Edwards & Foley, 2016).

Another comment indicates that the design of the formal session restricted the in-depth discussion due to a lack of time.

> "Because the formal session the time [for the discussion] is very limited, even just have one or two minutes, no more than five minutes. They have time to ask question, but the time for you to respond is very, very limited. Sometime the interaction is not enough." (PhD_ESSm1)

Nevertheless, this student also agreed the necessity to visit a formal session. The best thing that could happen is people who shared the same research background went to his presentation and gained an overview of his research. After the session in a social event, the audiences would actively explore the topic and give him "personal" "direct" feedback. Accordingly, he added that "I think that this, the formal and informal there, they link with each other."

Even if no children are accompanying them, this does not mean that delegates can leave caring responsibilities and family obligation behind. If the conference is held in the same city or in a city close to home, they also face the problem of having to give up the morning and evening sessions to pick up their children (Calisi & Working Group of Mothers in Science, 2018). If they are away from home, delegates may also be concerned about the situation at home. They will ensure that everything is okay at home through social media or other contacts occasionally during the conference. Therefore, it is difficult for them to 'leave their cares behind, in the hands of their partner or extended family" (Parker & Weik, 2014,p170) and devote themselves to the conference completely.

④ Being influenced by others

Many studies have found that accompanying partners (i. e. family members, friends, colleagues) have influence (to varying degrees) over whether delegates participate in a conference session. This is even more so in particular destinations (Lee & Back, 2007a; Ramirez et al., 2013). Most of the students interviewed had travelled alone to the conferences, but some were accompanied by family, a friend, a colleague or supervisor. As mentioned earlier, tourism represents a significant portion of conference motivation, and many delegates do tend to value the program and keynotes more than the destination. However, other people (Lee & Back, 2007a) often had a certain degree of influence on their participation during the conference. For example, when asked whether his supervisor's non-attendance influenced him, PhD_STMm2 said:

> "I think he's the best guy to learn from, right? He knows more than me. He is involved with more conferences than me, so he's the first guy or the best guy to ask for experience or to ask for advice from. So, what he did will definitely influence what I did and what I will do," (PhD_STMm2).

Another example of the influence of others relates to other delegates in the same sessions.

> "If my friend leaves, definitely, I will start to ask myself, 'Should I also leave?' Then she left. (I felt) it meant this session wasn't that good. Okay, it couldn't keep her, so maybe it couldn't keep me, either," (PhD_ESSf3).

> "There were a lot of people who seemed to have dropped out of this conference basically. So, I didn't feel I could necessarily trust the program," (PhD_ESSf2).

Being absent from social events

There were a number of reasons put forward to explain why students may choose not to participate in social events. These included the fact that such events often required an additional fee to be paid, and students experiencing feelings of exclusion from the larger group.

The issue of additional charges was common, with students unable to justify the cost of certain meals or events on the conference program. Whilst some conferences included things like meals, refreshments and a welcome or closing dinner in the registration fee, many others did not. This means that whilst a funding body may have covered the cost of a student's conference registration, meals or events would not be included and in order to participate, students would have to make the extra payment themselves. These costs can be quite high, and interviewees also commented on the small servings or poor quality of meals on offer at some conference venues.

> "And one thing I can tell you, the conference that I attended this year in [conference destination], the food was terrible and a lot of people couldn't eat the food. So, for example, they went out to have lunch instead of staying in the conference for lunch.

So, I think that is something that could drive people away from the conference as well," (PhD_BUSf3).

As a result, many students did not participate in social events such as lunches and dinners.

The other major issue was feeling alienated from the larger group. Integrating into the scholarly community is a big challenge for participants with relatively little experience, especially for some first-time students (Chapman et al., 2009). Compared with seasoned attendees, who can quickly get involved and are busy "making additional connections" and "learning from others" based on their previous experiences, students with less experience stay more in the exploration phase of conference participation, browsing the conference proceedings and selecting the upcoming sessions to participate (p.4). Unfamiliarity with the conference structure and the fact they have fewer contacts deepens students' sense of distance to the social events. Further, when the newcomer who has just joined and is in the periphery of the group attends the informal activity, the feeling of being excluded may see them leave early and not participate in subsequent events. Therefore, scholars (Hilliard & Tyra, 2006; McGuire, Simpson, & Duke, 2009) have called on mentors to play a leading role in building bridges for students by linking them to scholarly communities, helping them communicate with the outside world, introducing students at conferences and joining in on social networking, so that they can progressively advance their way from the periphery of the community to the centre.

Attitudes toward non-attendance

This section looks at the terms used to refer to non-attendance and at the attitudes interviewees held toward their own non-attendance and the non-attendance of others.

① Expressing non-attendance

There were a number of different terms used by interviewees to express non-attendance. The most common were: not attend, leave, skip, not go, go out, miss, not show up, drop out, get out, leave early, not participate. Others which were used relatively less often were: escape, get away, go way, go off, leave away, not join in, walk away.

Absences were referred to in the following ways:

> "The session I skipped wasn't very much relevant to my research. Also, I've got a friend waiting for me in [conference destination], so I just escaped that session," (PhD_ESSf3).

> "But sometimes the session was not as you imagined (it would be). Maybe something is very boring, so then I will drop out," (PhD_ESSm1).

In the interviews, participants used neutral and non-emotional words (e.g., "not attend/ participate/ go", "leave", "go out") more often when referring directly to their action. They also used words that conveyed thoughts and sentiments or articulated their feelings by applying a more value-laden expression, such as "skip"," miss", "drop out", "escape".

PhD_ESSf3's transcript was an example of this. As mentioned earlier, she generally insists on attending the whole conference out of courtesy. However, once when she participated in a conference which was not held locally, she noticed some sessions lacked relevance to her study field. Because of this she invited friends who lived in the destination city to meet her where the conference was being held. On the one hand, she expressed guilt over the fact that she had taken the conference time to do something unrelated to academic activity (she repeatedly addressed the fact that she has always been a well-behaved, good student at school and therefore gave the author a detailed justification of her plan to "skip' the conference). On the other hand, she expressed through language such as use of the word, 'escape', her eagerness to leave the conference to meet the friends she hadn't seen in a long time. This was an example of how language often reflects the mood and feelings about stories that are being shared (Trent & DeCoursey, 2011).

② Perceptions of their own non-attendance

Interviewees' attitudes toward their non-attendance were evident not only by way of the terms they used but also in their responses to specific questions related to how they viewed the behaviour (their own and that of others).

When discussing their own absence, the answers varied according to how they viewed the conference they were supposed to be attending. Conferences are known to offer a range of potential benefits for delegates (Coryell & Murray, 2014; Fakunle et al., 2019; Ghosh & Githens, 2009; Kuzhabekova & Temerbayeva, 2018). In line with this, some interviewees agreed they risked missing opportunities and benefits the conference may have offered as a result of their non-attendance. But others attached little importance to full attendance, preferring to attend strategically to meet a limited number of personal goals.

> "I know for me, it's of course a negative effect, like I miss a lot of things. But there are also some positive sides like I can fully immerse myself into the sessions that I really enjoy, rather than feel like it is a task, or that I have to go to all the sessions. That makes the schedule a struggle for me. I think it's a freedom for academics and it's a good reason for being in academia in the future, (the fact that) you can make your own choices," (PhD_BUSf2).

> "I'm fully aware that I may miss these kinds of opportunities if I just leave early. But I only went to the conference with two purposes. One is to give a presentation. The other one is to meet a particular professor. So, I failed to meet that professor but I did give a presentation. So, the rest I don't feel like it's too necessary for me to stay there and attend the rest of the conference. Plus, I have to work," (PhD_ESSf1).

Other ways in which they expressed their non-attendance included phrases like, it's "up to you", "your choice", and "my own" decision.

> "I think it is okay. I think now the conference is more like a market, all those goods (are there but they are) not your own choice. But some of them are your choice. You just get involved with those sessions you are interested in, that's enough," (PhD_ESSm1).

> "So, some days if I didn't feel like attending, I'm like, 'I'm not going to attend today'. I just want to go and enjoy the sunshine. It's up to you, I mean no one's going to force you, but you have to be an adult about this, and sort of decide what's relevant for you and then go with that. And then balance it out with going out with friends and seeing the place and all of that," (PhD_STMf1).

> "But also, be aware that I don't want to attend all the sessions. I have my spare time… I want to have my own time to do some of my own stuff besides the conference," (PhD_BUSm1).

③ Perceptions of other 's non-attendance

The interviewees also noticed other people's absences but tended to think of it as a common or normal phenomenon which happened routinely in the conference environment. They continued to sum up such behaviour as being a result of the "personal choices" you are able to enjoy as an academic.

> "I would say it's quite common for people to skip a lot," (PhD_ESSf1).

> "I think it's quite normal to me to see not everyone attend every session during the conference," (PhD_BUSm2).

> "I felt nothing. I mean it's fine, their choice…But again, you're going there for a conference. It's up to the individual to choose whether or not they're going to go," (PhD_STMm1).

A further explication of their attitude toward one another's absences is as follows:

> "I don't feel anything (about their non-attendance). It's just their personal choice, it's okay. Like if you're interested in the conference, you're interested in the presentation you should be there. If you don't go there, I wouldn't say it's their loss. I would say that if they missed anything that's relevant to their research, but I just think everybody has their own kind of choice and they make their choice. But if you do go to a conference, I would imagine you should at least attend a couple of sessions. Otherwise, what's the point? Like the registration fee is so expensive, you can't just ... I'm not judging anyone…But I just think that this is what I would do to make the most of it," (PhD_BUSm1).

> "I think it's pretty normal. I think you don't really expect people to attend all the sessions, especially in my field, [interviewee's discipline]. It's a very, very broad research field, so I think just after one or two sessions, if people got to know they couldn't really get many ideas from it, or they couldn't even understand what was going on, they would just choose to leave. They would like to make better use of their time," (PhD_ESSf3).

From the comments above, it seems evident that delegates at association conferences are somewhat accustomed to others being absent during sessions in the conference program.

Feeling uncomfortable at the conference

It is worth mentioning that unpleasant emotions brought on by feeling excluded or isolated, feeling unworthy or 'less than' in relationships, and feeling like one was 'out of place' or unwelcome impacted not only student delegates' attendance in formal sessions but their overall conference experience as well.

PhD_STMm2, for example, showed a lack of confidence at the conference because he was a first-year student in the university and was surrounded by seniors who "knew more about the conference and the research area". He was required to present at a poster session, however was made to feel inadequate, irrelevant and unimportant:

> "I was standing there for an hour, but no one came to me or asked me a question. It felt like no-one cared and no one was looking forward to seeing me, so I just didn't go to the last session," (PhD_STMm2).

Similar statements were made by other students. As one female student reported:

> "I think it was quite hard being a PhD student with people who are a fair bit older and more established in their careers. When I gave my paper, it wasn't particularly well received. That was not a great experience of a conference. So that actually is what sticks in my mind and gives me anxiety about every other conference I go to ever since," (PhD_ESSf2).

PhD_ESSm2 expanded PhD_ESSf2's comment, sharing the unpleasant experiences he had at one conference:

> "I clearly remember what someone actually said to me at this conference. I felt really terrible because he [an American professor] said to me, '*Oh no, you're still a PhD*'… It's almost like you have to earn the right to speak at this conference," (PhD_ESSm2).

Results were similar by gender but indicate that academics of different career stages sometimes were treated differently. PhD_ESSm2 said that although he has worked as a practitioner for twenty years and has built a reputation in the industry, he felt an imbalance of power and underappreciated when he participated in the conference as a PhD student. He felt that because he was seen to be just a “starting academic”, his knowledge was unimportant. One example of this was when a senior academic professor who was talking to him:

> “Stopped (the conversation) halfway through, without finishing the sentence, and went straight to one of the keynote speakers. I was left (standing there) and it made me feel like ‘I'm not important enough for this person. I'm not worthy of the respect of this person’,” (PhD_ESSm2).

He also noticed that giving the presentation was a challenge for him in “a conference wherein the western world is dominated by white western.” Because he is “somebody of colour” and “somebody from a third world”, even though he felt confident enough to deliver a public talk, the “unwritten rule” gave the audience a general impression that the presentation given by people with an accent is not as credible as one given by “white men who are very articulate in the English language”.

Based on these inequities of power, he concluded, “conferences in some ways replicate the power dynamics in society”. When inquiring about whether such uncomfortable experiences could further influence attendance, he replied:

> “I would still attend the sessions, but it may affect my satisfaction level. I would not be very happy, but I would still get something out of it,” (PhD_ESSm2).

Previous studies (Chapman et al. (2009,p15) have also found “disciplinary entrenchment by senior scholars led to feelings of disempowerment for students.” Some students in this research stated they had been downgraded or ignored by seniors PhD students in the past, and that this had impacted their conference experiences. They felt the difference in treatment between those who had already entered the academic circle and who had strong reputations, and newcomers, was stark - even though both should be regarded and treated as equals in terms of their conference delegate status. When people feel undervalued or that they are not having their needs met, they are more likely to respond with an emotionally driven course of action (Ravn & Elsborg, 2011). This perhaps explains why non-attendance may be one preferable response. The phenomenon of inequality and exclusion which occurs in the conference setting may be similar to that which can occur in the workplace or in society, where a hierarchical status may operate (Ford & Harding, 2010).

Feeling excluded was also a reason for leaving a social event before its conclusion. For instance, PhD_ESSm1 expressed a sense of exclusion from other groups while PhD_BUSf1 found it challenging to fit into the atmosphere.

> "Sometimes if I found social events very exclusive for some groups, I might just drop out and do my own thing," (PhD_ESSm1).

> "And for the dinner party, I didn't stay there until the end because it was too much for me. A lot of the delegates at my table just left after we finished the dessert, and a few staff stayed there. They just jumped into the dancing pool to start dancing and other crazy stuff, so I left at that time," (PhD_BUSf1).

Despite complaints from a handful of interviewees who underwent uncomfortable experiences, most interviewees indicated they enjoyed the conferences overall. Rather than participating in the conference fully, they selected to participate in particular sessions and social events they were interested in, felt comfortable at, or could afford. A range of vocabulary was used to express their acts of non-attendance. The term "personal choice" was employed by many students to show their attitude toward both their own non-attendance and the non-attendance of others. Feelings of uncomfortableness of inadequacy did not significantly impact their attendance at formal sessions; however, it was seen to have an impact on their participation in social events. The behaviour or suggestions of others was also seen to have an impact upon their attendance and non-attendance behaviours.

4.2.4 Stage 3: Reflections post-conference

When asked about their likely participation in future conference, many participants were generally positive. They expressed a preference for face-to-face conferences and made suggestions for improving attendance levels. These suggestions included improving the format, providing more social events, inviting well-known keynotes, improving service and facilities, providing good catering, having focused topics and selecting a suitable destination.

Suggestions for encouraging higher attendance

Many participants made suggestions for improvement which included: improving the format, providing more social events, inviting well-known keynotes, improving services and facilities, providing good catering, having more focused topics and selecting a suitable destination.

They also put forward ideas about how to improve attendance, although they were not highly optimistic about conference organisers ever being able to motivate full-attendance. This was because they felt it would be extremely difficult to meet the diverse range of needs academic conference delegates had.

> "In my opinion, I don't think it's possible to get full attendance. Like everyone registered attending the conference from the first minute, from the very beginning to the end. It's not their fault. But sometimes it may be the topic the audience is not interested in; or maybe the talker is not giving a very interesting presentation. So, there are a lot of reasons, but I just don't think full attendance is, quite possible," (PhD_ESSf1).

A number of participants expressed confidence that they would most likely continue to skip sessions at future conferences.

> "I think if you ask me: am I going to skip some of the sessions in conferences that I attend in the future. Actually, I would say I'm positive I will. The reason is, as I mentioned, I just want to enjoy the sessions that I'm highly interested in and to bring myself less intense to attend all of them," (PhD_BUSf2).

PhD_STMm1, who was one of the very few full conference attendees, provided another interesting observation. He has only participated in one conference so far. Despite the tough schedule in the four-day conference, he participated in the full program and actively communicated with other delegates. However, the reason he did this was that it was his first conference and he wanted to make the most of the potential collaborative opportunities he believed would be there. Additionally, because it was a domestic conference, he was able to take extra time to go sightseeing afterwards.

> "But if I were overseas, I would definitely (take some time away from the conference) if I couldn't get a few days after the conference to go on my own private holiday. I'd probably take a day and just go and see the city, because why not? I like conferences but I'm still human," (PhD_STMm1).

This section has discussed the three separate phases in PhD student's conference experience. Before the conference, students often receive funding from their university or other entities. However, the expectations of their funding providers are not always very clear. They also experience development of motivations for attending the conference during this phase. Such motivations are driven by both external and internal factors. Of the external incentives, the reputation of the conference was considered to be the most important consideration, followed by the institution's support (and expectations) and the invitations they received from others to attend. Intrinsic motivations for attending a conference included showcasing their research, making connections, opportunities to learn, and achieving other goals (e. g. increasing visibility, gaining confidence, or exploring the conference destination). Combined, these motivations have significant impact upon students' later attendance and non-attendance at the conference.

In terms of behaviour *during* the conference, only a handful of students engaged in the full program. High attendance applied only to events where they felt they were obtaining good value, when they stayed out of politeness to speakers, where they felt they could achieve specific individual goals, where they were attending a conference for the first time, where they were treated well or if they were under the scrutiny of supervisors. Rather than attend the whole conference, many interviewees only went to a particular conference session. The reasons they were absent in certain sessions included their opinion that the session was uninterested or irrelevant, they had a busy schedule or a personal issue, or they were physically or mentally fatigued. Being excluded or undervalued did not lead them to be absent from formal sessions but it was found to be a motivating factor for them to not participate in social activities. Having to pay an extra fee was also a major concern when deciding whether to participate in a social event. Their participation also was swayed by the perceived opinions and behaviours of other people. They believed non-attendance at conferences was common/normal, and was a matter of personal choice for both themselves and for others.

The interviewees offered some suggestions for increasing delegate attendance during conferences however, interviewees did not expect full-attendance in future conferences was a realistic aim, even if the conference format was improved as they suggested.

Table 6: PhD students conference participation

<table>
<tr><td>Stage 1</td><td colspan="2">Motivators: external motivator (expectation of the funding institution, being attracted by the conference reputation, being asked by others); intrinsic motivators (showcasing their research, opportunities to learn, building relationships, achieving other goals including increasing visibility in the field, gaining confidence and exploring the conference destination)</td><td colspan="2">Inhibitors: limited funds and the time-consuming nature of travel</td><td>Pre-planning and scheduling before travelling</td></tr>
<tr><td>Stage 2</td><td>Participating fully in the conference: perceived to be good value, concerns over appearing impolite, under watch)</td><td>Choosing to attend a particular conference session: topic was interesting, related to their research field, or given by a well-known presenter, themselves or a friend or colleague</td><td>Being absent from formal sessions: lack of interest in topic, conference fatigue, competing priorities, being influenced by others</td><td>Being absent from social events: additional charge, feeling alienated from the larger group</td><td>Feeling uncomfortable at the conference: lack of confidence, feelings of uncomfortableness of inadequacy</td></tr>
<tr><td>Stage 3</td><td colspan="2">Attitudes toward future conferences: prefer face-to-face, conference format will remain unchanged</td><td colspan="3">Suggestions for encouraging higher attendance: improving the format, providing more social events, inviting well-known keynotes, improving services and facilities, providing good catering, having more focused topics and selecting a suitable destination</td></tr>
</table>

4.3 Academic staff

The second group of participants in this research were current academics from STM (science, technology, and medical), ESS (education and social sciences), and BUS (economics and management) disciplines at four Australian universities. The results suggest the level of attendance is not highly correlated to gender but is clearly evidenced in the disciplines and the stage of careers.

The reason lies in the fact that conferences in Australia now demonstrate “much more emphasis on gender equity, as well as diversity in general”, and have a “very strong emphasis on equal representation of male and female delegates,” (MCA_STMf1, ECR_STMf2). Conversations with interviewees from different disciplines indicate that great importance is given to the ratio of men to women in conference attendees, basically striving to reach 1:1, with the proportion of female delegates sometimes being even slightly higher than males (MCA_STMf1). ECAs_STMf2 also believes that Australia, as a whole society, has done a better job in terms of gender equality than many countries. Family members being jointly responsible for the care, Australia’s policies and the corresponding child care available at many universities have partially solved the care problem. They reported that have not experienced the inequality caused by gender, either at the institutional level or at conferences. Therefore, among the many female participants interviewed, no one felt they had been significantly neglected or treated unequally at the conference because of their gender. This result is quite different from previous research where the number of female delegates was lower than that of male delegates and females felt they were treated inequitably (Jones et al., 2014; Martin, 2015).

However, the rules in different disciplines do sometimes have an impact upon attendance. For some participants from ESS and STM (e.g., ECA_STMf2, MCA_ESSm1), attending a particular conference or session is included in the span of job responsibility. The career stage can also impact non-attendance behaviours differently. The following sections detail the attendance and non-attendance patterns of academics from different stages of their career.

4.3.1 Stage 1: Motivators and inhibitors impacting conference attendance

This section looks at factors which underpin academic staff intentions to attend association conferences.

Motivations for attending

The academics interviewed stated they were motivated to attend conferences by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Extrinsic motivators were things such as the expectations or requirements of their employing institution, being attracted by the conference reputation, or being invited to speak/participate in an official capacity. At the same time, intrinsic needs of participants played a part. These included the desire to share the results of their research with peers, opportunities for learning, and the chance to build new relationships or reinforce existing ones.

<u>External motivators</u>

Some of the external factors which prompted academics to choose to attend a particular conference included the expectations of their employing organisation and their own professional needs at the time, the enjoyment/rewards they perceived conferences offered them generally, the particular conference's reputation, the organising body and the keynote speakers who would be attending.

① Expectations of the institution

Most academics said they received funding for participation in conferences from the faculty or university at which they worked, but that the university funding application was often conditional. Many universities viewed presenting a paper as a prerequisite for application and hoped that employees would receive feedback and bring the ideas back to share with colleagues in their local research community (Mair et al., 2018). At the same time, it is seen by the university as an excellent opportunity for junior researchers to "get experience, and get a feel for the field." Senior academics may also use the conference environment to help them "get more ideas and build on the knowledge that I've already developed because I'm gaining new knowledge," (LCA_BUSf2). However, it is also the case that some academics immediately left the conference venue after the completion of their presentations and used the remaining time to pursue personal objectives not related to the conference itself.

Some academics interviewed stated they were required to submit an expression of interest (in what they hoped to achieve by attending) at the time of lodging a conference funding application and/or submit a summary report afterwards, relating what had occurred to their research output. Without achieving the goals promised in the application, some feel it can be challenging to obtain funding approval in subsequent applications. In addition to showcasing research, research output covers publishing papers and forming collaborations. As mentioned earlier, universities attach importance to engagement and hope to strengthen contact with the outside world and promote cooperation by sending employees to attend conferences. In such cases, the actual program of a conference is therefore not a high priority.

Many academics offered reasons as to why they believed this was the case. Due to the different conditions set for various disciplines, there are different perceptions of the university's expectations. All respondents recognised that attending conferences can increase their exposure and raise the reputation of the university. In accordance with the idea of "I am representing the university, as an institution that does good research" (LCA_BUSf2), the attendees attempted to "establish a benefit for the university" (MCA_ESSf1). Some academics did not have an understanding of the conference outcomes expected by the university and regarded the conference as simply an aspect of their professional development. Some said they did not understand or believe that the organisation or unit that had funded their conference registration was expecting their attendance over the whole program.

> "The school itself doesn't have an explicit expectation for each conference outfit or something. So, they don't ask what happened after this conference or what happened because of the conference. So, the benefit of the conference is not so clear," (ECA_BUSm1).

> "I have never been actually told ... I don't know exactly what would be their rationale," (ECA_ESSm1).

> "I don't think they really have an expectation in terms of outcome… it's not common to require a tangible outcome. I think it's just part of the bigger activity that you do as a scientist," (MCA_STMf1).

The vast majority of academics said although they were able to access funding from the university or other sources to attend the conferences, they had autonomy in selecting the locations and the sessions to attend. A few did comment, however, that their superiors assigned them some conferences. Their understanding was in line with that proposed by Rogers (2013), where a conference can be regarded as an extension of research activity, and therefore there is a certain responsibility upon employees to take part. Some interviewees said that professional demands increased over time, sometimes with an explicit request that academic staff employed in certain disciplines need to “attend a conference at least once” and “present” in order to “keep their job”.

> “And what I'm doing now is that my academic supervisor is advising me to just prioritise one or two conferences a year. I was asked by my institution and paid for by my institution to go. So, it wasn't a case of me choosing the conference and saying I’d go to that particular one. In this case, my boss told me, ‘*You’ve got to go, and we'll pay for you.*' So, I had no choice in what I did,” (MCA_ESSm1).

> “This is really part of the duty because working as a postdoc for [interviewee’s discipline], for our program, we need to at least attend the workshops in this conference,” (ECA_STMf1).

Interviewees from one university commented on the emphasis their institution placed upon engagement. They said the view was that for that institution, a major focus of their employees' work “… was on collaborating with other practitioners and other academics in other universities, particularly overseas universities,” (MCA_ESSf1). Therefore, they were encouraged to purposefully and pertinently attend specific conferences in order to “engage with the relevant broader community,” (MCA_ESSm1).

② Being attracted by the conference reputation

The reputation of a conference is the scale by which its quality is measured by many academics (LCA_STMm1; MCA_STMf1). According to interviewees, the conference reputation is measured in terms of three major elements: the conference’s rankings in the field, the conference organiser, and the invited speakers. The delegates referred to these conferences as the ones which were “annual”, “the largest”, “top”, “number one” “with low acceptance rates”, and “A-star” conferences which were “very prestigious” and “very important”. To a large extent, this prestige associated with these conferences reflects the influence they have upon the overall field. The organisations that are capable of hosting such conferences default to be the “well-known institutions”. A subordinate professional organisation or community also gives scholars a sense of belonging to the conferences, in particular to an annual conference (Hahm et al., 2016).

Other responses discussed the fact that if the organisation holding the conference also published well-known journals, delegates would have greater access to opportunities for publication. This was very attractive for scholars when selecting the conferences to attend, particularly with the institutional importance placed upon academics generating numerous publications each year. Attending such conferences, making presentations and having those presentations published helped to improve one's reputation in the academic world, which in turn enhances the quality of their resume and future prospects for employment (MCA_ESSm1).

Another reputation factor that attracts academics was where "distinguished scholars" or "famous people in the field" were invited to the conference. Conference attendees overall are found to be quite critical of the choice of speakers (Rogers, 2013), however where quality speakers were advertised, interviewees were highly motivated to attend. It may be the case that the presentations delivered by these "big shots", "big names", and "rock stars" in interviewees' research areas are more quality-assured. In this regard, delegates were excited to be able to see the authors of the literature they had cited in their articles, speak live.

> "I am a bit of a snob, so I will always go and see the big names… I would always prioritise going to see the big names because I like to see the big scholars and hear them and see them because sometimes, it's a bit of a surprise. So, there may be scholars that you've read and, that you've used in your own writing and so it's always interesting to go and see them in person," (MCA_ESSm1).

The effect of a well-known keynote can also generate public and media attention and attract more delegates. However, this, too, can pose problems. When so many delegates only attend a particular conference in order to hear a well-reputed expert speak, it may lead to other sessions on the program being poorly attended.

③ Being asked by others

There were also some instances where an interviewee had attended a conference as a result of the prompting of someone else. In some cases, it was because of an invitation or suggestion from friends or acquaintances from the same field (ECA_ESS1f), in others it was from a keynote speaker they had met at another conference (MCA_ESSf2) and sometimes it was as a result of an invitation from the organiser (ECA_BUSm1). Such invitations would increase as the interviewee's career and reputation had advanced (MCA_STMf1).

<u>Intrinsic motivators</u>

Just as the funding (or employing) institution has expectations or requirements that conference attendance will see their academics' research showcased, their learning developed, and their collaborative relationships expanded, academics themselves are motivated by such opportunities for professional exposure and growth at conferences. Academics are certainly more likely to make up their own minds when choosing which aspect of a conference to attend, but their motivations will generally be intrinsic ones.

① Showcasing their research

Academics referred to the opportunities conferences offered them to showcase their work as “an excellent platform”, “great advertising” (ECA_ESSf1), “promotion” (ECA_ESSm1; ECA_STMf2; LCA_BUSf2), and “selling yourself” (LCA_BUSf2) in the academic field. Others mentioned they were “opportunities for job hunting or promotion” and “achieving a sense of identity as an 'academic”.

> “So, if you present your work there, it means you will establish yourself as a person in the field, they will know you, and hopefully they will know that you do good quality work… especially when you are an early or mid-career researcher, you need to establish your name in the field” (MCA_STMf1).

> “I mean, people want this kind of recognition. They want to feel accepted or they want to be listened to by people that they think are in their area of research, whatever. So, personal gratification is also a reason, I guess, people attend conferences, yeah... Academics don't always have a sense of having an audience. Although we are writing all the time, it's very difficult most of the time to really visualise an audience, because when you publish your paper, you get like I don't know many people will actually read it, so it can be a really, really small number of people. So, when you get this kind of feeling and ... it's gratifying. It gives kind of sense to what you're doing” (ECA_ESSm1).

② Opportunities to learn

Academics interviewed stated they were eager to attend conferences in order to keep abreast of the current and latest thinking in the field. A small number of academics mentioned that because they are Australian-based and are geographically distant from other countries, attending conferences was important for their academic development. Therefore, they liked to go abroad and actively attend international conferences and communicate with scholars from other countries.

> “I think in Australia, it's important that we go overseas…because it's very easy to forget in Australia how isolated we are. We're very good at networking within our own Australian community, but we tend to forget how far away from things we are. So, I think it's good to go overseas and just get a reality check and go, 'Okay, so that is really what's happening at the front'. That's what state of the art means in my field," (MCA_STMf1).

③ Building relationships

Making connections includes meeting people who may experiencing similar professional circumstances to yourself, establishing relationships which may help progress your career and seeking out those you may be able to collaborate with in the future. These connections are important pull factors for academic staff attending conferences. In discussing such connections, ECA_ESSm1 stated rather than “creating new ones”, they tended to “strengthen existing connections” at conferences. He said his conference motivation was, at least in part, to meet old friends, which also influences whether he will attend certain sessions or social events at the conference. Meeting (old) friends was noted as a common driver of attendance. This observation has been made in other studies into academics’ attendance at conferences (Mair et al., 2018). When a session is viewed as being unimportant, or is in conflict with the time of visiting friends, they are more inclined to spend time with friends.

> “Conferences are a great opportunity to meet up with friends you haven't seen for a while and colleagues you haven't seen for a while. So at that particular colloquium, I may decide that I might go and have a coffee with a friend I haven't seen for a while rather than go to a session,” (MCA_ESSm1).

④ Achieving other goals

Interview responses indicated scholars also viewed conference trips as opportunities to visit other universities or potential research partners. As Mair et al. (2018,p62) they “combine the conference with a visit” to others.

> “I may be persuaded if I see that the conference features a school that I really admire and would like to see more of. That may persuade me to go," (MCA_ESSm1).

"…that was a two-in-one business trip. We squeezed the conference in on our visiting trip. So, actually we first visited our project partners in some Italian institutes and universities, and then we attended that, uh, conference together [in another city]," (ECA_STMf2).

Therefore, conference destination plays an essential role in choosing a particular conference for academics, and there is a clear tendency shown in selecting the international conferences. ECA_ESSf2 is an example. Her husband works in an industry that is close to her research field, so the couple often go to the conference together and sometimes seeks the opportunity to visit a mutual friend or have a holiday at the conference destination.

"So, we actually quite like to blur the line between work and home life. It works well for us. It's good fun.… Absolutely, and to me, it's a win-win though, because we get to bring our family into what we do. We get to meet other academics and share our work. Sometimes we get to go somewhere nice where we can have a bit of a holiday," (ECA_ESSf2).

However, some academics paid more attention to the conference itself. ECA_STMf2 gave a vivid metaphor to explain how she defined the relationship between the conference and the destination. On the one hand, she agreed the destination was "one of the key factors that attracted delegates to visit the conference". But she also emphasised the importance of conference itself by saying:

"The destination was regarded as ice cream, but the conference itself is the main dish. I would like to enjoy the dessert, but I place more importance on the content of the conference," (ECA_STMf2).

This is consistent with the conclusions of previous research (Rogers, 2013; Zhang et al., 2007) which found that delegates place more emphasis on the conference itself when deciding to attend a given conference. For those people, tourism was not a large consideration in making a decision on their attendance. One somewhat related aspect of this, however, was the fact that some of the more experienced researchers interviewed (those who travel frequently and have already visited many countries), did place importance upon the appeal and 'creature comforts' of the destination when making their conference attendance decisions.

Inhibitors to attending

Although those academics interviewed usually receive conference funding from their university, for some of them the amount is not enough to cover numerous conferences each year, and sometimes does not even cover the full cost of a single conference.

> "PhD life is really hard I think, but ECA life…I don't know how it is in other kinds of disciplines, but in terms of funding for ECAs in the [interviewee's discipline], I found it so much more difficult than at the PhD level," (ECA_ESSf1).

It can also be difficult for LCAs at the level of Associate Professor and Professor to get funding for overseas travel. One interviewee explained the situation thus:

> "(Interviewee's school) assumes you should have some project funding to support yourself, and they support ECA and level C below only," (LCA_STMm1).

As specified in some disciplines, the university will not provide any sponsorship if the conference is held in the city of the university (MCA_ESSf2). As a result, some academics had to pay for themselves or used research grants or went through other channels (unless they were being invited as the keynote speaker or invited by the organiser, where the cost is paid by the organiser). This means there are insufficient funds to pay for social activities, for instance a gala dinner, at their own expense. The lack of funding can also dampen the academic's enthusiasm for conference participation altogether.

> "I personally refused to pay the funding myself. I will not do that, because this is not a hobby. This is not. This is not a hobby for me. This is a professional endeavour," (LCA_ESSm1).

Another factor that negatively impacts full conference attendance by academics is the time and effort required. Some academics considered the geographical location an issue and pointed out that Australia is far away from other countries. Even attending domestic conferences is time-consuming and expensive. Another impact is that attending too many conferences would reduce available time for research, or for personal and family commitments. As a result, many of those interviewed felt two conferences/ year to be a "reasonable" number.

Additionally, the semester arrangement in Australia is different to that in other countries. Many association conferences are held outside of teaching periods to ensure academics are more easily able to attend. This can make attending conferences in Europe or the United States even more challenging for Australian academics during teaching periods (MCA_ESSf1, MCA_ESSm1). If they did have the opportunity to travel overseas, they would need to arrange their schedule well in advance to achieve multiple objectives during the trip; simultaneously balance their teaching tasks (e.g., lesson preparation, student assignment, PhD supervision) with the conference program. Therefore, if they do decide to attend an overseas conference during teaching time, their capacity to attend all segments of the program is significantly reduced. This sentiment has been noted in other studies, (Cassar et al., 2020; Mair et al., 2018; Mair & Thompson, 2009; Mohammadi & Mohamed, 2010; Yoo & Chon, 2008; Yoo & Zhao, 2010; Zhang et al., 2007) which found that delegates' travelability (including time and money) cost pose constraints upon their attendance. It also in line with other research which found that having insufficient funding and limited time is a source of stress for Australian academics in terms of conference attendance (Bexley, James, & Arkoudis, 2011; Winefield et al., 2003).

Pre-planning and scheduling

In consideration of funding and time, participants usually planned the schedule during the conference in advance with some making "a rough choice" (MCA_ESSm1) or 'half of [my] decision" (LCA_ESSm1) after browsing the conference program. Some delegates believed that it is important to do some homework beforehand. Doing so would enable them to know which experts or potential partners in the same field would attend the conference. They would then make a plan by marking the presentations offered by the experts they wanted to hear, or contacting other parties they wished to meet with in advance, to arrange appointments.

> "Without doing my homework; if I just go there and register and then go for it, I would get lost in the crowd. That's not the best way to do it; to travel to some place and spend three or five days in a conference without a purpose," (ECA_STMf2).

> "I look at the program, and I say, you know … 'interesting, interesting, stupid, boring, interesting'. And I won't go to anything I'm not interested in, because I know it would be a waste of time," (LCA_SSm1).

Sometimes academics plan well in advance to miss certain parts of a conference, and may schedule sightseeing activities which mean their non-attendance is a deliberate and premeditated choice. An example of this is evident below:

> "Sometimes if we need to skip the whole day, we plan it in advance. For (one particular) day, we planned to visit some attractions, so we skipped all the sessions. I think for that day, we kind of planned it," (ECA_BUSm2).

This interviewee planned to visit families and friends in the conference destination, and his initial goal of the travel was tourism. Such plans will impact attendance, particularly when the travel time and conference sessions overlapped, and they might give priority to their private travel and make arrangements in advance. In this regard, their pre-planning would reflect on the attendance of the conference.

This section discussed the internal and external factors that motivated academic staff to attend conferences and those which may have hindered their attendance. These factors included the expectations of their university or sponsor in terms of the conference outcome. Increasingly, financial restrictions in the academic sector are limiting institutional funding to support conference attendance which means travel and registration fees are sometimes paid by the academics themselves. Accordingly, academics spend considerable time assessing whether the likely outcomes of attendance align with their personal and professional goals and are more highly selective with regards to their attendance. In the case of universities, they seek "a valid return on their investment when they send staff to attend a conference," (Nebrig, Munafo, Goddard, & Tierney, 2015,p443). The outputs commonly expected from institutionally funded delegates who return from a conference are that they:

- share what they have learned with other staff members and students at the institution
- bring back conference papers that are available only to association members or registered attendees
- have created opportunities for exchanges across different universities
- have facilitated an integration of human and material resources to carry out a joint project (Oester et al., 2017; Stevens et al., 2016).

It was found during this research that an academic's early motivations for attending a conference had a significant impact upon their attendance and non-attendance behaviour during the event.

4.3.2 Stage 2: Academic staff's attendance at conference(s)

This section looks at academic interviewees' patterns of conference attendance (both full and partial attendance). Full participation was expressed most frequently whilst attending their first conference, where the program was seen to be of high quality, and out of respect for presenters. In other circumstances, academics were discretionary in their participation choices.

Participating fully in the conference

There were a number of reasons put forward by academic interviewees in relation to experiences where they had chosen to participate fully in a conference.

① Where they were attending a conference for the first time

When asked if they had ever fully participated in a conference, many academics stated they had attended their first conference as a student, and had stayed for the duration of the program.

> "For that one, we stayed the whole time. I think we were good PhD students who didn't want to put a foot wrong," (ECA_STMf1).

…Underpinning their attendance (as a first-time participant of a conference) was a thirst for knowledge and a passion for the conference environment.

> "Because the first time I was very keen to get lots of information, I believe I attended all the sessions," (LCA_STMm1).

> "I was super excited, and I was absolutely ravenous to soak up information. I wanted to attend every other paper, and they were all fascinating to me," (LCA_BUSf1).

② Where they perceived the conference offered good value

Speaking from their own experiences, the opinion of some ECAs is that their career is in the rising stage and they are still learning. As a result, they feel it is important to participate in the full conference.

> "But as I say, I'm still at the stage, because I'm still quite early, I'm still at the stage of trying to learn everything I can," (ECA_ESSf2).

> "It's absolutely worth it. I used to think that it was exhausting [for a four-day conference], but this time I kind of enjoyed it. Because I found these things are all new to me. It's a slightly different discipline and I found it interesting, so instead of feeling exhausted, I felt inspired," (ECA_STMf2).

The perception of value can be regarded as a subjective construct, which varies from person to person (Parasuraman, 1997). Value can be grouped around three themes: functional (utilitarian) values, emotional (hedonic) value, and the social value (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). While delegates value the functional aspect of the conference, the latter two have important implications for their overall experience (Lee & Min, 2013). In research on festival participants, Gursoy, Spangenberg, and Rutherford (2006) suggest that enjoyment could positively influence attendance of an event. It is undeniable that increased fun and pleasure can enhance a participant's experience in an activity. In addition to the appeal of the conference itself, the destination where the conference is held can also be a bonus. When the delegate evaluates the value, they often consider what social values are offered because, for some, the primary motivation for their participation is social networking and to gain acceptance rom peers (Lee & Min, 2013). If this value is not there, it will significantly affect delegates' perception of the conference, and may also lead to their early absence as a result of them shifting their attention to other things (see the examples of novice researchers). In order to maintain the continued support of delegates and make them fully satisfied and involved in the conference, the values they see in attending need to be taken into account, in order to improve their conference experience overall.

There is also the issue of the size of the conference. Some delegates determine potential conference value based on their estimation of whether it is a small or large event. Small conferences were variously described by interviewees as "those with 200 people or less" (ECA_ESSf2), "In one room, one session, two days" (ECA_BUSm1), and "If it's called a symposium or seminar or workshop it's definitely [a small conference]" (ECA_STMf1). Interviewees commonly viewed attendance during small conferences as being relatively stable (with fewer delegate absences). The reason for such relatively high attendance was attributed to the smaller scale, where participants had met with each other beforehand, knew who should be attending and had a general impression of each other. The overall atmosphere was said to be more relaxed and created a sense of belonging (ECA_BUSm1; ECA_SSf2; MCA_SSf1). This sense of belonging was seen as somewhat of a deterrent to non-attendance.

With the larger ("top") conferences keynote speakers are usually considered to be leaders in their field, hence most interviewees believed delegates cherished the opportunity to hear them speak and would not miss such opportunities for the sake of tourism (LCA_STMm1).

③ To be respectful or polite to speakers

There was also the issue of respect or courtesy for speakers. Even if some sessions were not satisfactory, interviewees said they would not leave their seat for reasons of politeness. Some stated they wanted to "at least give [the presenter] support and physically stay [in the conference room]," particularly when the speaker was not presenting to a full room (ECA_ESSm1). Even if they were just "sitting at the back, working and listening with one ear," (MCA_STMf1) or pretending to be interested in taking notes but instead were "busy with replying to my emails or doing other things," (ECA_BUSm1). In this way, the ECA would continue to stay in the room without interrupting the speech.

> "But I would never get up and leave; I'd always sit there and pretend that I'm interested. I would not sit there, and play on my phone or something; I would be polite. That's the luck of the draw. You never know what you're going to get, so I sit there and listen and walkout at the end. That's the way it is," (MCA_STMm2).

Choosing to participate in **a particular conference session**

As previously mentioned, the prerequisite of many applications for conference attendance funding is to do a presentation at the conference. There are some people, therefore, who are well known for presenting their paper and then disappearing for the rest of the conference (MCA_STMm2). The standard of selective participation in the sessions was also related mainly to delegates' motivation, that is, topics that contributed to professional development or interest in the topics and being attracted by well-known keynote speakers.

> "Where I go, actually, this field of research could be very good, and complementary to my field, but I don't know much about it. So, I'll go to this," (MCA_STMm1).

Alternatively, in order to support colleagues or friends, they may have participated not because they valued the session itself but more for the relationship of colleagues and friends.

> "I mean even when you're not interested, if it's a friend of yours or a colleague of yours or someone you respect, you want to go to that panel," (LCA_ESSm1).

"If I know who the supervisor is of the student, then I'll turn up to be supportive," (ECA_ESSf2).

There were also comments relating to moments of serendipity or surprise at conferences, where learning or pleasure arose unexpectedly. For example, ECAs were very happy to "be exposed to (new) kinds of research [or ideas] through a kind of serendipitous approach," (ECA_ESSm1). In such cases interviewees stated they had adjusted their schedules according to "the sudden situation during the conference" or their own mood, and "randomly" (ECA_BUSm2; ECA_STMm2) participated in some interesting sessions or sessions they were unexpectedly invited to participate. This has some support in previous research, (Edwards et al. (2017,p7) which found that "conference outcomes can range from the planned to the serendipitous".

4.3.3 Stage 2: Academic staff's non-attendance at conferences

This section focuses on interviewee's non-attendance during conferences and their attitude towards that non-attendance.

Being absent from formal sessions

In a similar range of views to those expressed by PhD students, academic respondents said the main reasons they were absent from certain conference sessions were a lack of interest in the topics, a lack of time (as a result of being busy with work commitments or family issues), exhaustion due to time differences, travel or a tight conference schedule, and the influence of their companions or peers.

① Lack of interest in topic

The reason mentioned most frequently for not participating in sessions is having no interest in the topic. Some participants added that after attending many conferences, it has become difficult to find an eye-catching topic that makes them "feel passionate" or "get excited" about a topic (e. g. ECA_BUSm1). There were also comments that whilst there are a number of leaders in certain fields who are frequently listed as presenters at conferences, the topics they discussed were well known, hence their presentations lacked novelty and were not worth repeated sittings (LCA_BUSf2). The perception is that if the topics are not attractive, it is a waste of time being in the conference room (ECA_STMm1; ECA_ESSf2; LCA_ESSm1).

However, when asked to explain "not interested" specifically, different views were put forward. Most scholars expressed a belief that it is hard to be interested in sessions that are not related to their professions. In this sense, they did not participate simply because the topics offered were considered to be too broad or irrelevant to their research field.

One scholar, however, took the opposite tack and noted that as she already had a clear understanding of her own research area (due to the long-term relevant experience in both industry and academia), she was actually more inclined to participate in presentations not directly related to her specialty. She stated she preferred to participate in sessions on broader or more exciting topics that had the potential to inspire her and provide learning growth.

Rather than going to a session that overlaps with her discipline, she said:

> "[I] would prefer to learn "something weird and unusual and that I don't know about. I know enough about (her own area). I'm comfortable with that area, so then I won't go to those sorts of things," (ECA_ESSf2).

② Conference fatigue

Having conference fatigue is another primary reason for delegates to be absent according to the interview data. After the three to five days of an intensive conference program, interviewees stated they felt physically and mentally exhausted and chose to "sneak out from the rooms and take a break," (ECA_STMf2).

> "You will get what we call conference fatigue. You get so tired; you cannot process anymore in conference…so you have to be a bit selective. By the third day of the conference, I get tired, and I know there are a couple of talks that are very important for me in the afternoon. I might have an hour rest before then, and skip a session so that I have enough brain capacity for that important session. And that's what a lot of people do," (MCA_STMf1).

> "…because, at some point saturation comes in. It's just another research presentation you're listening to. So in terms of the impact of the presentations, it was less, because there were just too many," (MCA_ESSf1).

Physical fatigue also comes from the discomfort caused by jet-lag brought about by overseas travel, which needs time to be adjusted (Edwards & Foley, 2016).

> "…when you're travelling that distance to the United States, your body is out of sync. And so, there were times when I just felt I couldn't go to another paper, I just needed to sit in the sand or go back to my hotel room and have a rest," (MCA_ESSm1).

③ Competing priorities

Many academics interviewed referred to things such as a sense of “maximising my profit and productivity” (ECA_BUSm1) and “prioritising things in a conference” (MCA_ESSf2) when electing which formal sessions and social events they were going to participate in. This supports findings in other research indicating that academics have to adjust their itinerary in order to maintain productivity under the impact of competing priorities (Gross & Fleming, 2011).

> “So, I sometimes miss sessions because I want to catch up with collaborators…So it was the only time that we could meet and talk about the grant,” (MCA_STMm2).

> “It wouldn't surprise me that by the time you've been to your tenth conference with this group, that they're the ones you end up going to, and the rest of the time you're meeting with Professor So-and-so from whatever university that you only get to see once or twice a year. So, you say, 'Oh well I'll go and watch their session, and then afterwards we'll go and have a coffee, and we'll talk about what the research is.' And to me, that's a very good use of time rather than them sitting there, listening to a doctoral student who is doing something on a topic that doesn't interest them,” (ECA_ESSf2).

Another competing priority noted by academics interviewed was the need to continue to fulfil their role as a teacher. Even during the conference, academic staff still needed time to take care of their students; especially when the conference was held in the middle of a semester. Often, they may attend an important conference they were required (or wanted) to attend, but their ability to participate in all sessions was limited because they were busy marking, replying to student emails, and/or delivering teaching content. If the conference was held in their home university or city, the possibility of absences for such reasons was even greater, as they often needed to go back and forth between the conference and their work.

> “And also having it up there when my office is down here was bad, because it's too tempting to run down and do a little something, get stuck in your office for half an hour and then run back [to the conference],” (ECA_ESSf2).

In the words of one participant “you never switch off” as an academic, and flexible working arrangements result in long working hours. It has also been found to further blur the boundary between work and life causing an incessant mental burden (Henderson & Moreau, 2020). It is not surprising, then, that some academics complained they were spread too thin and overwhelmed with multiple tasks at hand.

④ Being influenced by others

- Travel partners/family

Research has shown that individuals are influenced by others with regards to their intention to attend a conference and in making their travel plans (Ramirez et al., 2013). Three groups are relevant with regard to conference attendance decision-making: colleagues, employers/ supervisors, and family members (Lee & Back, 2007a; Ramirez et al., 2013). These findings suggest having travel companions increases the possibility of non-attendance in conference programs.

Responses from interviewees in this research project supported the findings, with one respondent commenting:

> “I did not go to the reception primarily because of my family commitments. And I couldn't go to a dinner as well because I had prior commitments again, so I missed the social events,” (MCA_STMm2).

Late arrivals and early departures are also common at conferences. For example, encountering issues in family commitments often leads to fewer participants in the morning and late sessions and at social events.

> “It is sometimes good to have family when you're traveling for conferences, but you have to be very careful now in terms of your schedule, because that means you will skip more of the social events when they are there,” (MCR_ESSf1).

Although many of those interviewed have children, very few delegates were accompanied by family. Even when travelling with children, the children were old enough to be independent and to look after themselves. In other cases, the delegate was also accompanied by another family member who could care for the child(ren). These meant participants were able to participate in the sessions without worry. One interviewee did note that on one occasion another delegate attending a conference with a young baby had to juggle conference attendance with childcare duties. That delegate did have family members staying with her in the hotel, who helped with care of the baby, however the delegate still had to "sneak in and out of the conference to breastfeed" during presentations as necessary (MCA_ESSf1). This interviewee had also once brought her baby to a conference, but said she preferred to "sleep in the hotel" rather than "run a session and then disappear for a while and breastfeed and then come back". She was surprised to learn that on-site childcare facilities were often available during conferences (she had been unaware of this), but she still felt she would have been reluctant to use such services as she would have been worried about the safety and professionalism of the carers.

Interviewees commented that distractions associated with bringing family members to a conference could "limit your efficiency".

> "During the conference it would be noisy if you carried your family, particularly if you carried kids. And I would be limited in my work efficiency. You need to look after your kids, particularly young kids. Personally, I don't think it is a good idea. If you seriously attend a research conference, you are better to travel by yourself or with your PhD students," (LCA_STMm2).

Studies have shown that women with children feel more pressure to balance work duties and private life than do those without children (Käfer et al., 2018). For instance, women engaged in caring responsibilities have difficulties making adequate time to participate in social activities, such as the cultivation of networks and maintenance of relationships. Newcomers face the challenge of experiencing work-life tension, and it would be harder for young women in the job market (Dorenkamp & Süß, 2017). Returning to conferences, it easy to see family responsibilities can act as a barrier to conference attendance for primary caregivers. This is more commonly the case for female academics (Farr et al., 2017; Kass, Datta, Goumeniouk, Thomas, & Berger, 2019; Mair & Frew, 2016; Martin, 2012). Even if they travel away from home, they usually cannot absolve themselves of the responsibilities of managing daily family life (Willis, Ladkin, Jain, & Clayton, 2017). This probably explains why female delegates take their children along on business travel and have to watch children at conferences. A small number of conferences today aim to provide space and support for taking care of children (Bos, Sweet-Cushman, & Schneider, 2017; Hay, 2019; Käfer et al., 2018; Sardelis & Drew, 2016). Such child-friendly conferences aim to provide a level of basic security for delegates travelling with children, and to reduce the stress of combined childcare and work. However, it is hard for the parents (particular for female delegates) to be fully engaged in conference activities even if childcare services are offered. It is also doubtful that academics with accompanying children can throw themselves completely into the conference program, and will be distracted to at least some degree, by having their children on site.

- Peers

Mair and Thompson (2009) found the percentage of attendees traveling with colleagues is far greater than attendees travelling with a partner/ family. In some situations, those attending in a conference are members of a delegation and may thus leave before the conference ends, largely because of their peer association in their group. The research proved that when there is an impact of peers, if the other party expressed that they were not interested in participating in sessions and made an invitation to do other activities, the possibility of accompanying them would also increase (ECA_BUSm2; ECR_STMm2). Especially when attending international conferences, the proportion of delegates abandoning a certain period or even a full-day conference due to tourism is relatively high. For instance, if the conference is held in a tourist city and the schedule clashes with a festival, it would also increase the loss of people in the venue. ECA_ESSf2 recalled that when she was attending a conference in Milan during the Expo period, the attendees were “all out in the Expo or in the city of Milan because there was so much to see. It was just too attractive.”

⑤ Other factors

Some participants complained about the 'passive absences' they encountered, where their non-attendance was not their choice or fault. For instance, it is not uncommon for presenters to not show up without notice. Sometimes it is because the organiser has changed the room without contacting the presenter or changed the appearance order of presenters during the panel session. As the previous presentation did not start on time, the next sessions were delayed in sequence or shortened in time. As a result of such last-minute changes to a conference program, delegates have to reschedule their plans which might present difficulties. For larger conferences presentation rooms can be scattered long distances apart, which means considerable time is spent traveling between venues. Often this can result in delegates arriving very late for sessions they wanted to participate in, but perhaps being embarrassed about entering a room apparently late.

There is also the instance where a conference program is too compact (tight), again leading to missing certain sessions one would like to participate in, as a result of scheduling clashes.

Finally, there were examples provided in the interviews of times where rooms which were booked for particular presentations or conference activities were not able to accommodate all those who wanted to participate. This meant people arriving after all seats were taken had to choose between standing in a crowd to listen to the presentation or giving up and leaving.

In all the cases above, delegates may have fully intended to participate in a session, but through no fault of their own, were unable to. Organising conferences in ways which minimise the chances of these things occurring may be one way to increase attendance at conferences.

Many academics also explained that the other major reason for missing the final conference session was that the accommodation on the last day was not covered by their funding organisation's reimbursement, forcing them to take a return flight that day. The choice of flights may be limited from certain destinations, and hence segments of the conference program have to be missed. The situation was noted by Günther et al. (2015), and was said to be a reason for the lowest attendance rate at conferences being in the morning and evening, particularly on the last day.

Being absent from social events

The reasons for not participating in social events are similar to those given for being absent from formal sessions. They are: having no interest in the activity and having other priorities. However, the most frequently cited reason was the need to "recharge". Some middle and late career academics said that as they grew older, they were less interested in participating in social functions with large numbers of people.

> "But as I have got older and go to more conferences, I tend not to go to the conference dinner, because it's usually...well I don't like those very big events where you're sitting down with thousands of people," (MCA_ESSm1).

> "Because you're standing in a very, very large room and you're shouting. If you're talking to someone, you're happy; but if you are alone, you feel stupid. So, I don't enjoy them…to be perfectly honest, I think I don't like a lot of social events," (LCA_ESSm1).

Never having a chance to switch off was also noted as a rationale for not participating in social events. Even though social events would appear on the surface to be times for relaxation or enjoyment, the role of the academic delegate swings between being a representative of the institution at which they work and an ordinary participant (MCR_ESSf1). In some ways the conference program and social events are seen as an extension of the academic's work commitments because both occur "during regular working days and between 9am and 5pm," (MCR_ESSf1). But even in the evening, and over the weekend, delegates are in formal dress, and usually wearing a badge labelled with their university (Frew & Mair, 2020). This begs the question as to whether participating in the gala dinner or after-party should be regarded as overtime (or even workload) or not.

Attitude towards non-attendance

Participants' attitudes affect their action and in turn, determine the consequence of their attendance to varying degrees. Terms used by academics to express non-attendance were similar to those terms used by student participants.

① Expressing non-attendance

The most common words used by academics to describe non-attendance were "not attend/not go", followed by "leave (early)". The words used that that have more emotional content are "skip", "sneak out", "get rid of (the conference to travel nearby)".

> "So, people occasionally, including me, we sneak out from the rooms and take a break, have a cup of tea," (ECR_STMf2).

Other expressions used by participants provided greater insight to how they were feeling emotionally when they chose to be absent from certain conference offerings. One respondent stated, "I don't want to be like a prisoner in one place" (MCA_ESSm1) and said he was increasingly impatient to leave the conference venue and "go and eat in other restaurants and see other parts of that city." Participants generally considered deliberately missing sessions as a reasonable practice that occurred during conferences.

> "In terms of socials, so far, from my experience, I think I was just picky. The ones I missed, I deliberately missed. They were the ones I know I can live without," (MCR_ESSf1)

Interestingly, different participants have used different verbs for the same description of leaving the conference halfway. Some staff have used much occupational jargon （i.e., skip, bunk, skive）in their speech to describe this kind of act. Here, can we think that they, as teachers at the universities, treat participating conference programs as equivalent to participating classes as if they abide by school rules and regulations? Once the act of leaving a session early or not attending at all occurs, will the school vocabulary they use default this act that breaks the university norm as the same act as truancy? However, academic staff are not comparable to students who are restricted to regular school time and are not appropriate for attendance systems. They are engaged with conferences for a temporary period and delegates are flexible and independent, and usually have the option of whether or not to participate conference programs. Accordingly, there are essential differences between the situations regarding students and conference delegates.

At this point, can we also interpret the language used as a reflection of their humorous and witty integration into the conversation, showing the unexplainable joy of making time to do what they want to do after a wise choice to escape from the boring presentation or the unproductive session? The words used that have more emotional content are “skip”, "sneak out”. As in the example above, the word “sneak out” vividly reflects the delegates’ desire to take a break from their busy lives. “Get rid” is biased towards negative term, which more vividly shows the delegates’ eagerness to get rid of uninterested conference programs to take a breath and their desire to go around to relax. Building on these examples, delegates’ attitude towards absence is embodied in their choice of words to some extent (Fairclough, 2003)

② Perceptions of their own non-attendance

Only one participant considered frequent non-attendance for part or the whole of a conference program as unethical behaviour, particularly where attendees have been funded by their institution.

> “They’re cheating. So, they get funding from their university to go to Chicago. So they go to Chicago and they attend two or three panels in three days, and they spend most of their time just seeing Chicago. So, there are a lot of people who cheat like that, yes," (LCA_ESSm1).

ECA_ESSf2, for example, said the flexibility she had to choose whether to participate in a session or not was usual practice, and she felt most academic delegates were free to make those choices as they saw fit.

> "I don't feel bad about missing the odd session. As I say, conferences are very time-consuming. They take a lot of time. So, I need to get value out of that time," (ECA_ESSf2).

That is, it is natural to selectively participate in the sessions of interest according to one's own needs.

> "I certainly do not [attend all sessions]. No… So, these days, I don't feel an obligation to attend the maximum number of sessions. I go to those that interest me, and that's it," (MCA_ESSm1).

> "And then at the small, more specific sessions, you will always have people that don't go to the sessions. That's normal, at least in my field that's completely normal," (MCA_STMf1).

With the accumulation of conference experience many of those interviewed said it had become easier to screen the sessions offered on a program to identify which are of relevance or interest and to plan attendance accordingly. However, one interviewee also noted that such scrutiny and screening may also lead to delegates missing potentially new information from presentations they had underestimated or not considered participating. "You're much more selective and much less open to getting really new things that are either totally different in terms of the subject they're working on, or in terms of methods, in terms of approach, in terms of perspective. So, you tend to shut that door and then just focus on what you think is interesting for your own research… I mean, you don't even give a chance to the presenter to present whatever they are [going to talk] …" (ECA_ESSm1).

③ Perceptions of other's non attendance

Most respondents perceived absence during a conference as excusable. For example, due to work arrangements, perhaps some delegates could only take time to participate in a one-day or even a half-day of the conference. There were also travel difficulties (flight times) to consider and unexpected events (family or work) which may force delegates to abandon some sessions or social events they might otherwise have participated. The participants further emphasised that attending a conference is "not like a school, or doing something compulsive," (MCA_ESSf2) as there is no-one there who is going to force delegates to stay in the venue. One interviewee, who attended on average in three to four association conferences annually, clearly explained that it is reasonable to not participate in the conference in full. Even with the sponsorship from the institution, the fund provider cannot force the academic to stay in the venue nor can it monitor or control attendance. Moreover, he stated, academics are not subject to nine-to-five working hours and have more flexible working arrangements which include “a lot of freedom”. Therefore, this participant expressed his thoughts on absences during conferences in the following way:

> “Attending the conference doesn't really require attending all the sessions...I know you cannot force them…But equally, I feel like a human being, and I think organisations understand that. It's human nature to skip the conference. And the other things are that it is part of the norm. We are okay to skip…I think after attending so many conferences, I think that's something so normal. I think it's become something no one would question it…it's part of your job to skip,” (ECA_BUSm2).

He holds the same view as other participants who believe that absence during a conference is natural. These findings reconfirm the findings of Mair and Thompson (2009) who found association conference attendees have more freedom in choices around conference participation than attendees of other types of conferences.

> “I guess that's human nature. They're only interested in the most important session,” (ECA_STMf1).

> “But sometimes it's natural for people to want to go,” (LCA_BUSf2).

ECAs interviewed gave examples of times where senior scholars or renowned keynotes left sooner than expected. The ECAs came to see or meet “the big names”, and they were disappointed when the opportunity for further discussion with them was lost.

> “I was disappointed because these “big names” often left immediately after completing their presentations,” (ECA_STMf1).

> "I have noticed that it seems to be the more senior people are with the organisation, probably the fewer sessions they go to,” (ECA_ESSf2).

> “Maybe, especially senior people, if they already have enough connection, if they don't find some papers, interesting then they will skip it,” (ECA_BUSm1).

From LCAs' perspective, a possible explanation is that as the understanding of the profession deepens, and the experience of participating in the conference becomes richer; they can already roughly deduce the content of the presentation early on. In this sense, senior researchers consider those topics to still be attractive to junior scholars, but they do not make much sense to them. If they are already seated in the room, and do not want to appear rude, they will usually remain in the room but will spend the time quietly working on other matters.

> "And [the topics] for some senior researchers probably [are] less attractive, because [the topics are] more or less similar to us," (LCA_STMm2).

> "My mentor used to be my professor at the [interviewee's previous university], and he's still my mentor. When he goes to conferences, I would say he only listens to about 20 per cent. The other 80 per cent he sits at the back working. He's in the room, and he listens with one ear. If he hears something that interests him, he'll pay attention; but 80 per cent of the time he just sits and does his work," (MCA_STMf1).

Therefore, more often, seniors have already made the decision not to go to the session when browsing the program. There are also academics indicating that it is appropriate not to participate in a specific conference program with any problem. This finding follows from Storme, Faulconbridge, Beaverstock, Derudder, and Witlox (2017,p418) who proposed that in deciding to attend conferences, experienced academics take into account "not only the length and number of times they must be present, but also about the moments they can remain absent". In the view of this, senior and influential scholars often enjoy a privileged status in their ability to choose whether to be present or absent.

Feeling uncomfortable at the conference

Respondents said negative emotions generated at a conference had sometimes impacted their overall perception of conferences. They made statements such as: When "everybody [senior people] attacks you and makes you feel like your paper is hopeless" and "as a PhD or novice researcher, [this kind of attack] makes it easy to lose your confidence" (ECA_BUSf1). The lack of positive feedback and "this kind of failure experience" were given as reasons why some young scholars suffered a loss of confidence (e.g. ECA_BUSf1; ECA_ESSf2; ECA_ESSm1). Some said they had felt they were "getting attacked by seniors or people who were not familiar with her/his research", and "suffered from a cold reception", which resulted in feelings of frustration, loss of confidence, and/or disappointment. These uncomfortable situations were often what drove some young academics interviewed to withdraw from the conference, needing to take time to calm down after doing their presentation or to discuss what had happened with others. This was another source of unplanned non-attendance which occurred during conferences.

Like the PhD students interviewed, some ECAs said their published content was "attacked" by senior scholars at a conference (a similar situation did not appear in the stories of MCAs, or LCAs). Martin et al. (2015,p3) worried that such an encounter might eventually cause newcomers to lose confidence in their research and to “adapt their research interests and career goals in order to conform to the established practices of both the conference and the community” (p.3). It was also noted that the difficulties faced by young academics was also reflected in the way conference sessions are sometimes scheduled. ECA_ESSf1, for example, said that after taking a long flight from Australia to the United States, “nobody came to my paper” because the session was scheduled as the last one on the second day of the three-and-a-half-day conference. The fact that she had travelled so far but was clearly not valued enough to be given a more highly visible slot on the program was very frustrating. The feelings of failure and lack of achievement she experienced were such that they directly affected her enthusiasm for the conference, and eventually led her to give up participating in the conference program for the remaining day and a half.

> "…What clinched the decision not to go, and to just like do some exploring in the city, was nobody coming to my session," (ECA_ESSf1).

The same sentiments were expressed by ECA_STMf1. She was dissatisfied with the conference organiser who often scheduled ECAs’ presentations on the last day or even for the last session. She said this always resulted in a sharp decline in attendance, and left her feeling as though no-one cared about her research.

Some academics were also critical of the program setting, facility and service (e.g., poor Wi-Fi, low quality of services). Such shortcomings in conference quality not only affected their attendance during the conference but also impacted the overall participation experience of delegates.

> “And if any of these at some point fail, it also reflects on the organiser. So, they are very much a central part of the success of the conference from attracting the delegates to the actual experience of the delegates there,” (MCA_ESSf1).

4.3.4 Stage 3: Reflections post-conference(s)

In general, academic staff enjoyed conferences and felt they made a useful contribution to an academic's professional development. During interviews they drew comparisons between their attitudes and experiences at their first conference and how they now felt and behaved at conferences. They provided input regarding what they saw as the future of conferences and made suggestions for ways to increase delegate attendance. Although some questioned whether it is necessary to attend numerous conferences each year, the vast majority of interviewees affirmed the positive benefits of attending at least a few.

When comparing their first conference with their latest

In comparing the pattern of attending conferences as a first-time attendee with their behaviours now (having had significant conference experience), most academics admitted they actively participated in each session when they attended the conference for the first time and tried to understand the content of each topic. However, after repeated practice, they found that it is tough and exhausting to understand every presenter's content fully, especially when the topic is not highly relevant to their specific field of expertise. As a result, they have found it more beneficial to only participate in sessions they see as being of relevance and importance, and to rest or network at other times. In this way, they see their participation approach as being more strategic and targeted.

> "…. because now you're more strategic in terms of where you want to be, at which stage in the conference, and more importantly, whom you want to be with. Otherwise, again, you are not prioritising. You are spreading yourself too thin, and you do not remember any substantial experience from the actual conference in itself. So, my point here is that I am very divided now in terms of what I want to prioritise in a conference because if I am not, I'm not going to get anything out of it and then I won't be there at all - because remember it's costly," (MCA_ESSf2).

The comment above is a typical rationale in support of attitudes to non-attendance suggested by interviewees across all career stages. The situation is in sharp contrast to their attendance behaviour at conferences in the past, where participants sought to participate in almost every session. However, not all attendees agreed their current behaviours were different to those they had in the past. One interviewee, in fact, expressed the following view:

> “I'd have to say I'm still doing the same thing. I'm sure I still did what I do now way back in the 80s. I just circle all the things I want to go to and then do everything. If you're giving up your time, you might as well make the very most out of it and see as many people as you can. So, I can't think why you wouldn't make full use out of a conference when you’re there,” (ECA_ESSf2).

It was noticeable in the discussions that even a seemingly 'boring', “not interesting” session could be worthwhile, and participating in a conference program will always be rewarding.

> “I think it’s a sign of not necessarily a bad conference, but perhaps it wasn't the right fit for you or whatever it was,” (ECR_ESSf1).

> “I hardly find any conference generally, disappointing or beneath my expectations. There's always something to learn,” (ECR_STMf2).

Attitudes toward future conferences

When looking at future conferences, in addition to considering maintaining the face-to-face conference still as the general trend, most academics indicated that the traditional format is difficult to change.

① Ongoing virtual

A few participants suggested that it is not always necessary to go to the conference physically. A likely explanation is that as a full-time academic, with significant experience of participation, they have already accumulated abundant knowledge in the long-term practice, and have a considerable network of contacts. They may also have a professional reputation in their field as a result of previous presentations or research publications. This would mean there are fewer motivations to attend conferences physically. There may also be fewer pull factors related to travel, meeting new people or seeing new things, given that at later career stages, many popular host destinations would have already been visited. Also, attending conferences can be expensive, and if the benefits do not appear to be directly proportional to the potential gains, there will be less motivation to spend funds in this way. With the development of technology, interpersonal communication can be carried out via online discussions or emails, and field participation may no longer be as necessary as it was when they were younger.

> “They're very, very expensive, and the reward is very small. Then there’s the fact of the matter that most of the talks are wasted time. Most…70 per cent is wasted

time…I think the necessity for conferences is declining dramatically… in my field, it's not necessary. It's good, but it's not necessary, I believe," (LCA_STMm1).

② On staying face-to-face

However, considerably more interviewees said they continued to benefit considerably from physical conferences. One of the MCAs used herself as an example and told of several significant and positive changes which had occurred during her career as a direct result of attending conferences. While studying her master's degree, she and her friends from Asia went to other Asian countries to attend a conference. After completing the presentation, she was invited by her mentor, who was in the audience at the time, to discuss a PhD offer from an Australian university. During her PhD study, she met the department head of the current university where she is working while attending the local conference in Australia. After the interview, she has naturally entered into employment at the university.

In another conference, she met the president of an association who appreciated her study. As a result, she was able to join in the most influential Asia-Pacific region-based professional association, which has been very helpful for the development of her career. It is worth mentioning that she and another PhD she met whilst attending a conference as a student became friends, and began publishing papers together shortly afterwards. Over the past decade, they have continued the relationship; both as friends and as professional colleagues. They are both now at the MCA stage and have been solid supporters for each other as they have travelled through their professional and private journeys. She was even invited to attend her friend's wedding in a foreign country. Therefore, when talking about the impact of conferences, she firmly believes they have been incredibly beneficial in her life, both for her academic trajectory and her personal life. She still actively attend conferences and continues to receive new inspiration from them and make interesting new contacts or research collaborations. Similar conversations regarding the importance of physical conference attendance have appeared in many of the responses of academics interviewed.

The vast majority of scholars have suggested that even with the advancement of science and technology, the appearance of a virtual conference cannot replace a physical conference. LCA_STMm2, a professor who specialises in artificial intelligence, strongly agrees that AI technology only serves as a tool. The frequent use of AI technology in conferences, such as Skype, Zoom, and web conferencing is likely to cause distraction, which is not as profound as face-to-face communication. Therefore, he encourages students to attend conferences in person, to learn about cutting-edge information, and to get in touch with other academics, which he said is akin to gathering additional mentors.

> “Half of the benefit of a conference comes from networking, not from the content, from the science you see on the talks, but from the networking. You cannot replace that with video links. I encourage my own PhDs to go to conferences, because I think it's part of your training as a scientist, you cannot be a scientist without attending conferences every now and then,” (MCA_STMf1).

> "And in particular, I want to send my students there because I want my students to get early feedback. Because it might be one of the attendees in a conference who might be their thesis examiner, we never know,” (MCA_STMm2).

Most participants said a face-to-face relationship makes the relationship between people closer, especially in a relaxed and pleasant environment such as a social function where people are “more open to sharing ideas”. They commented that such functions can “break the ice and build a bridge”, and that “you suddenly develop a friendship” (MCA_ESSf1; MCA_STMm2). Some academics said they now preferred to attend small conferences where many delegates were familiar with each other. Taking ECA_ESSf2 as an example, she has been participating in the same conference every year since she was a PhD and reports the annual stage progress at each conference. The audience, who are also regulars, are very familiar with her. She often receives constructive comments based on the progress of her dissertation and has gradually grown in confidence as a result of attending. Even after she started working, she continued to attend, viewing the event as something of a reunion. Such detailed depictions present an explanation for her full attendance because she is maintaining friendships and strengthening bonds. Such a phenomenon is in line with the findings of Foley et al. (2014) where conferences were seen as events which could enhance friendships between delegates.

③ On maintaining the traditional format

In fact, many academics interviewed believed conferences should continue somewhat in their traditional form. ECA_ESSf1, stated academics like her preferred a lecture that relies on the traditional PowerPoint slide presentation and is held in a fixed location, rather than in a flipping classroom. This idea of delivering a classic lecture model is also reflected in their maintenance of the conventional format, and most agreed that with improvements, the traditional conference structure is still the most effective way to deliver the content.

> "Do I think it [the conference format] should stay the same? No. But do I think it will stay the same? Probably yes," (ECA_BUSf2)

> "…the ten-minute presentation of a paper and the Q&A will still be there…. you will still need to have a more traditional way to ... I mean, you want to facilitate people meeting each other, so whatever works, it's fine, actually, I think," (ECA_ESSm1).

Suggestions for encouraging higher attendance

Given the numerous issues raised throughout the interviews, responses indicated that academics are not optimistic that full-attendance can be achieved in future conferences. LCA_STMm2, who has a rich experience in participating in and organising conferences, asserted that the conference organiser could only do so much to minimise many of the [non-attendance] impacts and "have some kind of strategy to maximise the attendance."

The suggestions made by academic interviewees for improving attendance levels at conferences included improving the quality of the speakers, offering a better program and increasing incentives.

Improving the quality of a conference is not only about screening high-quality submissions in advance, according to those interviewed. It is also about inviting well-known keynote speakers, and having a balanced, varied, well-structured and interesting conference program. Based on responses, it is reasonable to argue that the conference design and programming plays a role not only in attendance during the conference but also in non-attendance. To measure whether a program is well-designed, Severt et al. (2009) adopted some variables, namely, topic of interest, delivery mode, and length of meeting. Mair and Thompson (2009) found that 'interesting topic' is the most important attribute that influences attendees' decision to attend a conference. In fact, delegates' perceptions of conferences are changing all the time (Zhu & Luo, 2010). That is, the decision of whether or not to participate in a particular session is usually made when one sees the program list. During the conference, delegates have a high expectation that the program will give them positive outcomes through educational benefits (Severt et al., 2007), self-enhancement (Rittichainuwat et al., 2001), and further access to the latest ideas and technologies (Allday, 2016). Timely topics that reflect scientific advances, industry breakthroughs, and social trends determine repeated interest in a conference by attendees and new delegates (Borden, 2017). However, through summarising the results, the “interesting topic” usually refers to topics that have something which connects with delegates’ own research field.

There are two different schools of thought in terms of what constitutes an interesting topic. Most participants felt that “getting [topics from different streams] was not good” and preferred conferences which were not too broad in their themes, or those which were “more specific”. However, others stated they were more attracted by conferences with topics that covered a range of professional fields and were more “broadish”. ECA_STMf2, for example, said she had a vague understanding of the importance of interdisciplinary research but she wasn’t really clear about the importance of it in terms of her professional practice. When she was an independent project leader, she recalled when she was required to fill out a grant application which asked about multi-disciplinary involvement. She said there was “a complicated question that required (the input of) multiple disciplinary backgrounds". After realising that her multidisciplinary approach to her work was lacking, she made a conscious effort to attend multidisciplinary conferences which covered a range of majors and provided speakers on various and generalised topics. MCA_STMf1 further considered this issue from the perspective of cross-border cooperation, believing that a proper understanding of the context of other professional disciplines contributes to team building.

> "I find myself limited to my own field, and there is an urgent need to expand my horizon and learn other things, to gain knowledge from outside of my own tiny field,” (ECA_STMf2).

Aside from an interest in the topic the delivery mode is also a key factor when deciding whether to attend a conference. Live, oral speaker presentations are undoubtedly the most effective way to deliver conference content (Omnipress, 2017) but it is also the case that presentations scheduled in some time-slots (late in the day, particular on the final day of the conference, for example) will fall somewhat flat as a result of low attendance. Many conferences relegate the presentations of junior academics to these times, which often leaves them feeling unimportant and ignored. ECA_ESSf1 recommended that rather than putting all sessions given by PhDs together, the panels should be mixed with the sessions of other influential presenters. The keynote speakers with audience appeal can attract more people to the setting, giving PhD students a chance to have their work heard by a larger audience and perhaps receive some recognition. When conferences go for several days and several keynote speakers are invited, he suggested organisers try to “break it up into different sessions to ensure that the 'rock star effect' brought by the keynote speakers can keep the audience,” (ECA_STMf1).

Others suggested trying to separate the sessions of similar topics carefully so that participants can choose what they are interested in during a concurrent session. Furthermore, to avoid a situation in which delegates “had to pick out one, sacrifice the other one”, the multiple panel session is proposed to be a single track or no more than two parallel tracks for the oral presentations. All the rest of the conference papers can be turned into poster sessions so that “people can have more time to go around, to read the poster, to have a conversation,” (LCA_STMm2). In order to maintain liveliness and smooth transitions during the conference, interviewees felt it was always important to have a session chair (or ‘track chair’ as they’re called at some conferences). Those in this role can mobilise the enthusiasm of the audience, so as to retain numbers when less well-known speakers are about to present.

The delivery mode of the conference includes not only the formal sessions but the social events as well. The importance of networking for academics has been proven by many studies (Wakefield & Dismore, 2015). Therefore, a well-designed delivery mode is also closely connected with social activities to enrich the conference program content. For academics, especially for those of LCA level, providing more (interesting) social functions is more attractive to them.

> “I think one way of doing it is to make sure the social and the networking sessions are interesting and attractive because they're, they're super important, especially for people in my career stage,” (LCA_BUSf1).

Another suggestion frequently put forward by interviewees was that multi-day conferences should always end around midday, in order for presenters and delegates to be able to attend the full program but still have time to travel home in the afternoon/evening.

> “So, finishing the conference at lunchtime would be my tip - so that people can get a flight in the afternoon and get home on that day. If you finish it in the evening, they just don't turn up to the last two sessions,” (ECA_ESSf2).

Despite having suggestions about how conferences can be better organised in order to increase attendance, many interviewees expressed doubt about the possibility of ever being able to achieve full attendance by all delegates. Attendees are people from diverse backgrounds with different levels of need, specialised knowledge and experience, which means what they hope to derive from a conference, will be different too. This creates challenges in designing a conference program that well is well-balanced and will meet a variety of needs (Rogers, 2013). The other factor the conference organiser has to consider is the schedule of the conference program as a barometer, which is applied to signify the emergent research fields (Henderson, 2019). The problem of being in a graveyard slot will be inevitably met at some point at the conference (Henderson & Henderson, 2019).

The inclusion of normal meals in the registration cost, in addition to refreshments and beverages during breaks, was seen by most as an important consideration for all conferences. As ECA_ESSf1 commented, "It sounds trite but food is important. Giving people the space to talk, get to know each other, and make connections" is important, she believed. She used a memorable barbeque experience on the last day of a conference to illustrate her point:

> "People just disperse [in the first two days] …you didn't have a chance to speak to them again [after short meeting in the first day] …then you saw them at the barbecue. I think it was a lovely way to close the conference, to make sure that people were coming on that last day…It was a nice informal way to continue to meet people… and a way of saying goodbye to people," (ECA_ESSf1).

> "If they [conference organisers] can provide good food, free lunch, free dinner…then the young academics will stay around in the morning and come back in the midday to have a free lunch. Not bad. After having a lunch, they can still socialise with the people nearby and probably attend some sessions immediately after lunchtime. So at least that can help maintain reasonable attendance levels for the presentations," (LCA_STMm2).

Providing considerate service including appropriate incentives can enhance delegates' overall perception of the conference and make both attendees and hosts happy. The organiser can also take the opportunity to promote local tourism and achieve a win-win outcome where the conference promotes the local economy. LCA_STMm2 recounted an experience which impressed him during a conference held in a small town. The conference was due to commence at 4 pm, but prior to that delegates were able to ski nearby and enjoy themselves. The organiser provided free ski gear, which meant conference visitors were all in the same attire and could therefore easily recognise each other. This created a sense of connection and conversations were organically built between delegates before the actual conference had even begun. There were few other attractions in the town to pull delegates away from the conference environment, which – combined with the shared skiing experience - made delegates more willing to communicate with each other. In this way, not only did participants become immersed in the local customs and culture, they did it somewhat ‘together’ (and outside formal presentation sessions) which built a strong conference community and ensured there were few external distractions to draw people away from the conference. They noted that at this conference, attendance levels were quite good. This is a good example of what Tourism Australia (2016,p1) means when it states that the ideal conference is one which is able to “balance conference content and professional outcomes with strong destination appeal” (p.1).

One interviewee suggested attendance may be increased if funded delegates were required to submit a detailed report about what was learned and what was achieved, however, they felt this would only be a temporary solution (ECA_BUSm2). Instead, they felt rewards for those who presented (such as an on-site, face-to-face conversation with a journal reviewer or editor, and increasing the opportunities for publication) would be helpful. Some conferences may also have explicit requirements for poster presenters. For example, for a five-day conference, there may be volunteers conducting on-site inspections for three days. If a presenter of a poster is not there during the times they are scheduled to be there, then perhaps they will not be allowed to publish in the corresponding journal of the conference.

Table 7: Academic staff conference participation

Stage 1	**Motivators**: external motivator (expectation of the funding institution, being attracted by the conference reputation, being asked by others); intrinsic motivators (showcasing their research, opportunities to learn, building relationships, achieving other goals including increasing visibility in the field and exploring the conference destination)	**Inhibitors**: limited funds and the time-consuming nature of travel	Pre-planning and scheduling before travelling		
Stage 2	**Participating fully in the conference:** where they were attending a conference for the first time, perceived the conference offered good value, to be respectful or polite to speakers)	**Choosing to participate a particular conference session:** related mainly to delegates' motivation (topics that contributed to professional development or interest in the topics and being attracted by well-known keynote speakers), serendipity or surprise at conferences	**Being absent from formal sessions:** lack of interest in topic, conference fatigue, competing priorities, being influenced by others (travel partners/ family, peers), other factors (‘passive absence’)	**Being absent from social events:** additional charge, having no interest in the activity, having other priorities	**Feeling uncomfortable at the conference:** feelings of frustration, loss of confidence, and/or disappointment, feelings of failure and lack of achievement
Stage 3	**Comparing their first conference with their latest:** participation approach as being more strategic and targeted	**Attitudes toward future conferences:** on going virtual, on staying face-to-face, on maintaining the traditional format,	**Suggestions for encouraging higher attendance:** improving attendance levels at conferences included improving the quality of the speakers, offering a better program and increasing incentives.		

4.4 Comparing responses from students and academic staff

PhD students and academic staff make up the bulk of association conference attendees. This section will compare and contrast attendance patterns at conferences between these two groups, based on responses provided in the interviews. Results from the data suggest there were strong similarities in behaviour and motivations across the two groups.

4.4.1 Similarities

This research has considered factors which impact conference attendance at three stages of a delegate's journey. They are:

- prior to attending the conference
- during the conference
- after the conference.

The motivations prior to a conference have a significant impact on whether participants attend the conference program fully or selectively across both groups. Academics, who usually have more accumulated experience and understanding of the conference environment are able to plan and schedule their attendance according to their needs more appropriately than students. This is because a student, particularly one who has not attended (m)any conferences before will be less knowledgeable and more likely to plan to participate in most sessions (at least initially). Students will also be more likely to want to make contacts and develop some sort of reputation or name for themselves.

During the conference, the novelty and curiosity of attending the conference for the first time are the biggest factors motivating students not to miss any sessions. Academics, however, will tend to only participate in the sessions they see as being useful. But they will often also stay out of respect or consideration for speakers.

Based on the (positive and negative) experiences and feelings derived from the conference, their intentions around attendance behaviour at future conferences will be formed. For students, feeling undervalued or ignored can result in a loss of confidence and reduced motivation to attend conferences in the future.

Most participants across both groups decide in advance whether to go to a session and their judgment is based on whether the session is interesting or related to their professional area, and whether there are well-known keynote speakers. Therefore, when the participant perceives that the session may not be related to their research interest or is not familiar with the presenter, they will question whether it is necessary to participate. Pre-planning that focuses on tourism or having plans to visit other cooperative institution or friends and relatives in the conference destination increases the possibility of absence on site. Feeling physically and mentally exhausted or being occupied by other essential affairs (for instance, academic commitments, administrative burden, or multiple temporalities) that have to be dealt with in priority are the reasons why academics have failed to show up during the conference program. Although delegates attended conferences with different purposes, networking opportunities were a common priority across both groups interviewed. This supports findings from other related studies (Fakunle et al., 2019; Gilmartin & Gnjidic, 2017; Mitchell, Schlegelmilch, & Mone, 2016; Severt et al., 2007; Yoo & Chon, 2008). Rather than participating in a presentation that lacks fresh concepts or is difficult to hear or understand, delegates preferred participating in workshops which provide platform-level support for brainstorming and exposure to social contacts. Again, this is in line with conclusions drawn by (Oppermann, 1997).

Sometimes the participants choose non-attendance as a result of passive selection. Not only do attendees sometimes choose to be absent from a conference session, but presenters sometimes are absent. Unplanned or last-minute changes to programs, rearranging of venues (rooms), and long distances between venues (on a tight program) can all result in low attendance, as can poor room planning, where those who would like to participate in a session are not able to because they cannot fit into the room. In such cases, delegates may lose interest trying to overcome difficulties and elect to rest, shop or go sightseeing instead. The reasons for absences at social events for students were the need for additional payments, a lack of interest, feeling alienated and their own unwillingness to socialise. For academics it was more about needing time to rest or wanting to spend time with travel companions.

When asked about how they viewed non-attendance at conferences, most academics thought it was normal. Students tended to follow the lead of their supervisors and other, older delegates, and came to also view non-attendance as normal. Both groups said that only by improving the quality of the conference, improving the program (including reasonable arrangements for sessions and adding social functions), and providing incentives or services would it be possible to retain delegates for longer periods during conferences.

4.4.2 Differences

There were, however, a few differences in responses from students and staff. Although giving a presentation is mostly a prerequisite for students *and* academic staff to apply for funding, the institution makes no special demands on students' funding application. An academics' individual research performance is often used as an evaluation condition when they apply for financial support and they are required to have research outputs. Students' conference expenses rely more on funding from the PhD program provided by the department or graduate school with most or all of the expenses being covered during studying. Academic staff has grants across more channels, and in order to fulfil professional demands, they are sometimes even willing to participate in the conference at their own expense.

During a conference only students and some early career academics appeared to be affected by the emotional impacts of being coldly treated, ignored and excluded. Some were not accepted by senior scholars during and after their presentations and others found it challenging to integrate into existing groups at the social events, resulting in them leaving the scene. In the interview with MCAs and LCAs there were no similar experiences recounted (even though they have all clearly been PhD students and ECAs previously themselves). Students tended to feel the traditional ways of delivering conferences were not adequate, while the academics (particularly at the senior level) felt the conventional format could be improved upon but generally worked. Overall, except for individual examples of cold reception and exclusion, other factors do not seem to have a measurable effect on delegate's non-attendance at the conference.

As a result of comprehensive analysis of interview responses with PhD students and academic staff, the researcher suggests that data saturation has been achieved. It is also evident that the data obtained is adequate to answer the research question; that being why delegates would be absent from formal sessions and/or social events at conferences.

4.5 Chapter summary

This chapter has presented the discussion of the key findings and addressed the research questions and objectives. The study found that there is not much difference between the participation of PhD students and academic staff. Insufficient funding and time constraints have prevented both groups of participants from attending conferences as fully as they may otherwise have liked to attend. External factors such as the financial support of the institution, the popularity of the conference, and invitations from the conference organisers have promoted participants to attend. Internal factors, including the participants' desire to demonstrate their research through a positive performance at the conference, learning new knowledge and skills, expanding and consolidating social circles, and achieving tourist purposes such as visiting friends or sightseeing at the conference destination have also played their part. Reasons provided during interviews for participants to be absent from formal sessions and/or social activities include a lack of interest in specific topics, needing to attend to other essential duties, being physically and mentally burnt out, and experiencing feelings of exclusion.

Interestingly, interviewees stated almost unanimously they were very accustomed to non-attendance – either their own or that of other delegates. They generally believed that it was appropriate and understandable that individuals elect to not participate in some (or even most) sessions according to personal needs and commitments. These findings will be discussed further in light of the extant literature in Chapter 5.

5. Literature review

As indicated by grounded theory methodology, literature needs to be reviewed again after data collection and analysis. Findings reflect that the essence of the participants' attendance is to obtain resources. This motivation, which is influenced by internal and external factors, also paves the way for participants in terms of whether or not they will participate in sessions and social events during the conference. Because of differences in respondents' personal motivations in terms of the type of social capital they want to attain, their input and involvement during the conference varies. This ultimately affects the outcome of their conduct, i. e. whether they participate in the sessions fully or partly or do not participate at all. Two theories that are of value in understanding delegates' attendance and non-attendance during a conference are social capital theory and involvement theory. Therefore, this chapter comprehensively analyses the attendance and non-attendance of participants by combining these two theories.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore why delegates are absent from sessions and social events while attending conferences and to try to find the appropriate theories to interpret the phenomenon. Therefore, this section returns to the original intention of the research and returns to the corresponding theory derived from the results analysed from the concepts of grounded theory methodology. Not deliberately, but naturally, two powerful concepts are generated from the findings. The first is resource acquisition. The researcher found that participants have treated the conference as a temporary occasion to obtain resources. Ultimately, the internal and external motivations that drove the students to attend the conference were to achieve their various expectations (such as learning or social opportunities). In this sense, a conference is a community of people who come together for a common purpose. According to Zhou and Bankston (1994,p824), cited in Song and Chang (2012), a "community's social capital encompasses certain resources available to an individual through their membership in that community or group and is found in the closed system of social networks inherent in the structure of relations between persons and among persons within a collectively." The integration of social capital within the community promotes the coordinated development of the community itself, thereby enhancing its internal cohesive interpersonal network. The trust generated by the members of the community makes each other willing to share resources, enabling the exchange and combination of resources. The conference community's social capital (and the resources encompassed in that social capital) are access to social interactions, and networking for collaborative opportunities (cooperative program, publishing, resource sharing) and future employment opportunities.

The second concept is closely related to the first. Because of different motivations, attendees each want to generate and access social capital, but with individual differences. This results in two different types of participation patterns, namely, attendance including full or selective participation, and non-attendance. Both can be summarised as the different levels of involvement of participants during the conference. This also constructs the second concept, namely, involvement. To reveal the theory behind the phenomenon and establish a theoretical framework, this chapter will discuss the relationship between the two concepts in detail.

5.1 Social capital theory

This research explores the association conference experiences of PhD students and academics. It analyses how individuals seek to obtain resources embedded in the social structures and social relations present at conference settings. Many of the themes identified by the research participants are related to aspects of social capital. Therefore, social capital theory is drawn upon in the following sections to add depth to the analysis.

According to Woolcock and Narayan (2000) social capital originated from social research, and the description of social capital dates back to Hanifan (1916,p130) who found that community participation helps improve academic achievement and income. In that paper, the author defined social capital as a “tangible substance that is very important in daily life”, including goodwill, fellowship, mutual symphony, and also as the social interaction between the individual as the basic unit of the social structure and the family. Jacobs (1961) used the concept of social capital for the first time in the book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, explaining the importance of citizenship to the prosperity of cities and citizens' lives.

However, it is the French sociologist Bourdieu who systematically describes social capital. Bourdieu (1986,p248-249) describes social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources, which are related to a persistent network, composed of default or recognised mutual relationships”. Bourdieu believes that social networks are not naturally endowed and must be constructed by investing in an institutionalised strategy of the group relation. Social relations themselves can enable individuals to access to the actual and potential resources owned by groups and continuously gain the ability to create such resources or increase revenue by participating in group activities. According to the function of social capital, Coleman (1990,p302) describes it as "social-structural resources owned by individuals". Social capital neither depends on independent individuals nor exists in the process of material production, but exists in the structure of interpersonal relationships. The reason why the resources obtained through their own social network relationships are called "capital" is that the investment in these network relationships can bring people the expected benefits and provide convenience for people to achieve specific goals. Later researchers expanded upon Bourdieu and Coleman's research from the micro to the meso and macro levels. They contended that social capital should no longer be conceptualised and studied only as resources owned by an individual, but as the wealth and resources owned by a group, a community, and even an entire society. The emergence of social capital provides a new perspective for explaining the social relations between individuals and between organisations and has become one of the most potent and popular research fields in social research. However, scholars in different fields have approached the concept from different research perspectives, resulting in various definitions (Onyx & Bullen, 2000).

In the events literature, for instance, the applicability of social capital theory has stimulated scholars' interest in studying various events that bring not only physical capital and financial capital but also accrual of social capital in the hosting communities (Mair, Chien, Kelly, & Derrington, 2021; Misener, 2013). In the cases of mega-events, (for example, Olympic Games, World Cup), even after a few months, host nation residents can still benefit from the continuous increase in psychic income (i.e., pride and euphoria) and perception of the quality of life brought by events (Gibson et al., 2014; Kaplanidou, 2017; Kaplanidou et al., 2013). The effect of small-scale sport events is also significant. For instance, open water swimming events have been found to create a casual social atmosphere, and allow participants to establish friendship among fellow swimmers (Greenwood & Fletcher, 2020). Sport events at the community level are conducive to the establishment of cooperation and network sustainability (Misener & Mason, 2006; Wäsche & Marketing, 2020; Zhou & Kaplanidou, 2018). By organising such events, social relations can be improved; the barriers between destination residents can be broken down, and the sense of identity of the intergroup and internal cohesion of the community can be enhanced. These community members come together to create social capital, which contributes to social wellbeing and makes a long-term contribution to the community empowerment (Chalip, 2006; Daykin et al., 2020; Kellett, Hede, & Chalip, 2008).

Researchers also elucidate the power of social capital by examining festival and other cultural events. In a similar way to sport events, cultural events inspire participants' self-efficacy, arouse their sense of belonging to the community, and generate a response to get civic pride and personal wellbeing-being (Ahn, 2021; Brownett, 2018) This can be especially important for rural areas, small towns, local government areas with high population movements and/or severe economic decline. In situations where an area is experiencing difficulties in continuing traditional industries and relatively weak tourism resources governments may rely on community events to revitalise the local economy, stimulate community vitality, consolidate social capital, and establish a strong link between residents and event venues (Attanasi, Casoria, Centorrino, & Urso, 2013). However, with ongoing social change, the structure of destination economies and populations may change, and events that used to work well may need to be adapted to produce high levels of social capital. To respond to the change the generation and use of social capital needs to be adequately arranged to achieve sustainable development of regional and rural places stably (Mair & Duffy, 2018). In this regard, it is necessary to integrate social capital in the management and creation of new products and tourism policies focused on cultural activities and produce sustainable events with a sense of fun and enjoyable social experience and participation events sustainability (Reverté & Izard, 2011; Stevenson, 2020).

Simultaneously, considering the diversity of attendees, maximising opportunities for access to social capital for different groups through participation in events has also attracted researchers' attention. Focusing on the psychological sense of the diverse communities (for example, refugees and ethnic minority immigrants), the distribution of social capital should be adjusted reasonably according to their needs, and the multicultural festivals can promote and convey the sustainability of society (Hassanli, Walters, & Williamson, 2020). Voluntary service can also be an effective means to improve the generation and storage of community social capital in their locale (Coalter, 2007; Skinner, Zakus, & Cowell, 2008). For volunteers, the accumulation and development of social capital may include the mutual benefit and motivation to build relationships and enhance learning from each other; they value programs that improve their personal experiences and cultivate social capital across communities (Peachey, Bruening, Lyras, Cohen, & Cunningham, 2015).

Although most studies in the area of events and social capital have verified through the empirical study that holding events brings positive returns. However, some events may also have a negative impact. Even as they raise the image of the travel destination, bring considerable numbers of visitors and allows local residents to build a sense of community by creating a shared experience and facilitating communication, increasing social capital in the region overall, events may also generate uneven distribution of social capital, exacerbating the imbalances that already exist in the local community (Stevenson, 2016). Wilks (2011) questioned whether events could become "sites of inter-connections between people from diverse backgrounds", not believing that it could create an ice-breaking environment and atmosphere where people from different backgrounds could happily mingle. Holding events may also run counter to the original intention, increasing crimes and intensifying conflicts, and worsen intergroup relations (Chiam & Cheng, 2013). Such adverse effects usually appear during events (Mair et al., 2021). Therefore, to avoid counter-productive effects, scholars suggest the local government and event organizers make long-term planning for legacy and not just stop at the immediate effect (Devine & Quinn, 2019). In response to this, more research should be put into studying the association of event and social capital to provide more reference and guidance for social sustainability. However, events literature on social capital are still not much and have focused on festivals (Devine & Quinn, 2019; Misener, 2013), while the conference, which is another big part of the event, has been understudied.

The definition of social capital theory referred to in this research draws on micro-level concepts with similar to that put forward by Lin (1999). Lin (1999) stated that social capital was obtained from resources embedded in the social network, and the acquisition of social capital was an investment in a social relation with expected returns. In other words, individuals take purposeful actions to make profits by building networks through participation and interaction.

5.2 Involvement theory

Social capital theory is used to explain the primary purpose of participants' attendance, namely, obtaining resources. However, from the findings, it can also be seen that participants differ from person to person in how they obtain that social capital. In terms of this research, this translates into different attendance behaviours and degrees of involvement during a conference.

The concept of Involvement was first introduced by American social psychologists Sherif and Cantril in their exploration of self-identity (Li, Su, Hu, & Yao, 2019). The definition of Involvement has been considered as "a person's perceived relevance of an object based on inherent needs, values and interests" (Zaichkowsky, 1985,p342). According to the research, the higher the degree of participation in the product or service, the more customers tend to buy; therefore, involvement is often used to test user loyalty and heavily used in consumer behaviour research (Jun et al., 2012). Bryan (1977) is the very first scholar to use the degree of involvement to illustrate outdoor recreation participants' unique behaviour and orientation, respectively, due to general or special interest (Li et al., 2019). After him, involvement has begun to be brought to more studies. The conception of involvement has been furthered characterized as "the state of identification existing between an individual and a recreational activity, at one point in time, characterized by some level of enjoyment and self-expression being achieved through the activity" (Selin & Howard, 1988,p237).

Within the leisure and tourism setting, involvement has been confirmed to have a direct impact on (Chang, 2012; Kyle, Absher, Hammitt, & Cavin, 2006), satisfaction and revisitation (Hwang, Lee, & Chen, 2005; Lee & Beeler, 2009), and tourist experience value of a destination (Prebensen, Woo, Chen, & Uysal, 2013). For instance, Festival participants who feel a stronger sense of pleasure, satisfaction and relaxation with events are more likely to get more enjoyment out of their favourite programs. These personal feelings also make attendees repeatedly engage in this activity to get re-experience, thereby promoting continuous participation (Beckman, Shu, & Pan, 2020). The young people involve in the Festival, the stronger their awareness of identity during the event is (Hixson, 2014). In the view of Lee and Beeler (2009), activities that are highly attended at the festival are more satisfied with the experience of participants who are more likely to revisit the old place. On the contrary, if the destination can satisfy the tourists' needs, these tourists will have higher participation and sense of belonging and eventually become loyal to the destination (Japutra, 2020). Therefore, building a destination brand based on tourists is a critical factor for tourists to form a (long-term) intention to visit the destination (Ferns & Walls, 2012).

In addition to the festival and other cultural events, many scholars also focus their research on sports. Decloe, Kaczynski, and Havitz (2009) take sports as an example, arguing that such activities are very challenging and require high physical tension and high energy concentration. Thus, they are more likely to bring flow to event participants (which means a feeling of satisfaction and pleasure, being full concentration to ignore the passage of time and increasing self-awareness). This flow will further motivate event customers to repeat participation in the sports or take on a higher level of challenge, thus generating sustained engagement. Motivation has a significant positive impact on the enduring involvement of sports activities, such as skiing, cycle, paddling (Chang & Gibson, 2011; Kouthouris, 2009; Ritchie, Tkaczynski, & Faulks, 2010). Through analysis, Lu and Schuett (2014) find that members who actively join outdoor recreation voluntary associations (ORVAs) due to social networks, public engagement and self-improvement have gained more volunteer experience by increasing sustained participation. The association between motivations of the members and volunteer experience is more robust as the level of participation increases.

Consistent with previous research (Havitz, Kaczynski, & Mannell, 2013; Kyle et al., 2006) the findings of the current study suggest that there is a noteworthy connection between motivation, participation and involvement for conference attendees. Involvement theory offers a useful perspective for a deeper analysis of these phenomena. Investigation on involvement stems from marketing and customer behaviour and serves mainly leisure, recreation, and sports visitors in tourism literature. However there are fewer studies linking involvement theory with non-leisure activities (Havitz & Mannell, 2005), particularly in the conference context. Drawing on the earlier work of Rothschild (1984), Havitz and Dimanche (1997,246) argue that involvement is linked to an "unobservable state of motivation, arousal or interest toward a recreational activity or associated product, evoked by a particular stimulus or situation." Further, three types of involvement have been used to analyse event attendees. They are enduring, situational, and ego involvement (Hixson, McCabe, & Brown, 2011). In the following sections these three types of involvement will be considered in relation to development of social capital in the conference setting. The different degrees of involvement of participants during conference in relation to their varying needs for social capital and their different methods of access will also be explored.

5.3 Social capital and enduring involvement

Many interviewees stated the primary external reason they attended a conference was that their institution (university) encouraged and (usually) sponsored their participation. In terms of why the institution would encourage or sponsor their participation, most felt it was seen as a way for the individual (and then hence the institution) to develop or obtain social capital. Participants also regard attendance at the well-known conferences as being the most effective means of generating such social capital benefits. Participants hope to achieve social capital development via opportunities to learn and socialise at conferences. It is not difficult to see that most of the participants are regular attendees of conferences, especially ECRs, who are more active, who usually have fewer competing priorities and who are highly motivated to advance their career and reputation. When the motivation to achieve personal goals and meet specific needs is consistent with the attributes of participation in the event, there is an enduring involvement (Kyle, Absher, Norman, Hammitt, & Jodice, 2007,p400). This attitude and motivation towards active participation at conference are relatively stable (Havitz & Mannell, 2005).

Delegates are motivated to attend conferences as a result of both external factors and inherent needs. When looking interview data, most participants received various levels of funding from their university. One important reason universities invest funds and resources in this way are to provide students and academics with opportunities to expand their national and international professional networks. Delegates obtain social capital through interpersonal connections outside the campus and relationships derived from interpersonal relationships. The social capital involved in universities is generally divided into internal and external capital. The internal social capital refers to the information exchange and resources sharing among various departments and faculties and the contacts and interaction between academic staff and students in various disciplines.

However, if the university over-emphasises the operation of the internal social capital, it may lead to complacency. This will make it more difficult for the institution to gain the information and resources needed for innovation, which will be a deterrent to its development. For a university to survive and develop, it must exert its enthusiasm and initiative and establish close ties with society. As a result, the university also acquires resources external to society through vertical and horizontal linkages. The external social capital a university has accumulated affects its ability to access various scarce resources, such as new funding and research projects, important, sensitive or cutting-edge information, and human resources (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Vertical resources also include the relationship between the university and higher education authorities, while horizontal resources refer to the relationship between the university and organisations and individuals that do not have a direct or indirect affiliation, such as the relationship with other universities and industries. One way to access both vertical and horizontal resources is to attend conferences, prompting Pittman and McLaughlin (2012) to urge educators to continue to support applications from their staff and students to attend conferences.

Conference participation also promotes the academic development of the university and the accumulation of external resources. For example, ECA_ESSf2 and MCA_ESSf1 have applied the knowledge learned in the presentations they gave, to the classroom. LCA_BUSf2 has also exchanged information on PhD training programs and teaching experiences with others at the conference, promoting the mutual integration and development of scientific research and teaching. The social network relationship formed between universities and external enterprises through the process of mutual connection and interaction initiated at conferences has a direct impact on each other's social capital promotion. Participants enhance their personal strength and expand their resources while feeding back to their institutions. This overall accumulation of individual social capital then benefits the collective.

It is not difficult to explain why academics are assigned to conferences by the institution where they are based. Academic staff see such conferences related to their field of studies as workplaces where they may fulfil the requirements specified by the university. It is reasonable to expect that if there is no mandatory requirement to participate in the conference in entirety, delegates may decide whether to participate in the next conference program based on their current situation. They are likely to seize the time to finish the work at hand instead of listening to a (seemingly) unproductive session. Proper rest also helps recover from the fatigue due to many days of continuous work and prepare for social networking afterwards.

When considering the conference program in the planning phase, external factors such as who the keynote speakers are and the reputation of the conference are priorities for most participants. At the conference, well-known delegates are often surrounded by junior academics and students seeking cooperation or help. The reason for this is that it is generally believed that presenters who are in a position of power or have social impact can pass on some of their accumulated resources (i.e., knowledge, contacts, etc.). The more significant the other party's reputation, the richer they are in terms of social capital and the more help they can potentially provide (Durbin & Tomlinson, 2010; Forret & Dougherty, 2004). This makes it easier for highly-ranked presenters to be relied upon to attract high delegate numbers and to have good attendance during their sessions, as others come seeking opportunities to learn from or work with them. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand why someone such as ECA_ESSf2 was more inclined to have meetings with (or participate in sessions given by) MCAs and LCAs with "social influence", than to spend time on presentations delivered by PhDs whom she viewed as being relatively poor in terms of their social capital wealth. Some LCAs (particularly well-known ones) also noted they were not the ones who usually took the initiative to talk to others at conferences, saying it was usually the younger scholars or peers who came to them for advice.

The three major intrinsic needs for attending conferences are learning, building relationships and achieving other goals (such as increasing visibility, building confidence and exploring the conference destination). The purpose of learning is to bridge the knowledge gap and obtain resources for complementary knowledge. The conference allows delegates to learn new knowledge and skills from different people to fill the gaps in the profession and to achieve professional development. Knowledge is divided into explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge (Nonaka, 1991). The former refers to the knowledge which can be clearly expressed and communicated in a formal and systematic language; the latter is the knowledge that has been accumulated by individuals or organisations over a long period and is not expressed in systematic, coded language. This tacit knowledge is more difficult to spread remotely through formal information channels. When acquiring new knowledge, new social networks are formed in the process of interactive learning and can evolve into new social capital (Látková, Wu, & Paulsen, 2009). The status, specifically the social interaction status of an individual or organisation, determines the type, extent, and quality of social capital they own.

However knowledge is often invisible, and people can only obtain it through socialisation processes such as personal participation, observation or practical application (Nonaka, 1994). In the case of the conference, a presenter converts tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge and shares it through professional language that others are familiar with. Essentially, they are aiming to generate a rapid transfer and absorption of knowledge on the part of the audience. Learning is not limited to this. After the conference, delegates return to their universities where they communicate with peers, discuss ideas, explore concepts more deeply, teach students, and later publish articles based on what they learned at a conference (Edwards et al., 2011). All of these have proved that learning is a dynamic process of continuous education and creation. Moreover, as research aims to solve complex problems, academics from different disciplines are pooling their resources to jointly develop technologies or products through collaboration (Durbin & Tomlinson, 2010). The process of collaboration allows the exchange, diffusion and creation of knowledge and social capital to flow to all areas of the collaboration in a process of interaction and transmission (Al-Tabbaa & Ankrah, 2016).

Face-to-face communication and interaction at the conference create greater opportunities for direct contact and knowledge sharing, which is conducive to understanding each other and establishing trust relationships (Collins, 2004). Trust is an understanding of the degree of dependence one can have on other individuals or organisations. It is most often developed following a series of personal interactions. The mutual trust between people in social groups implies a higher and more obvious value than physical capital and human capital – and is necessary for people to be willing to voluntarily exchange resources with others in groups or organisations. Academics including PhDs rely on the university and attend the conference as a member of their institution; the university they represent endorses their identity. This helps them be more highly regarded by other delegates, as they are seen to be a part of a reliable and trustworthy identity (the university). This, in turn, makes it easier for them to gain access to social capital (Lin, 1999). When the trust level in a relationship is high, the communication and exchanges between members are more frequent and the knowledge transferred is broader. In the case of conferences, the more 'involved' in a conference one is, the more trust is developed. Talking to each other in person puts delegates in touch with other delegate and deeper engagement. The transfer of knowledge is more efficient when a strong trust relationship and social connection is formed. The tacit knowledge, which is challenging to transfer itself, can also be smoothly converted into explicit knowledge and diffuse via effective conversation at the conference.

However, trust requires a certain amount of time to accumulate before it is formed. It is the result of repeated contacts and long-term interaction. To strengthen social bonds and increase the intimacy in a relationship, many people attend conferences organised by an association where they hope to connect with others. This is particularly so for smaller, more versatile local conferences of up to 200 people. Other studies have shown that collaboration is more likely to occur between geographically closer researchers (Gonzalez-Brambila & Veloso, 2007), possibly as a result of more frequent contact at meetings and conferences. Such relationships were found in responses from MCA_STMf1 and MCA_STMm2. Despite being from different disciplines, they both explained their major was very narrow, and the purpose of participating in the conference (hosted by a local association) was to make it easier for them to reach key decision-makers on funding applications. In order to grow the social capital, they had obtained at the conference, follow-up contacts (such as a reunion at the next conference) was used to transform the previous contact and trust into a long-term and reliable social relationship. This type of behaviour was discussed by Foley et al. (2014) who noted conference participants generated mutual benefits and friendships through (multiple) physical interactions.

Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) demonstrated that social capital is embedded between the networks occupied by individuals and can be obtained through the network. The academic community itself is a network full of information, and this network trait makes academia a more productive environment than others (Gonzalez-Brambila & Veloso, 2007). The conference can guide the formation of social capital, and the social activities provided by it can act as a bridge to establish a mutually beneficial platform that all parties are subjectively willing to attend to maintain the existence of the conference. In this sense, social capital can be established and continuously reproduce itself through the exchange of on-site and off-site resources. It is worth adding that many academics belong to several associations and are active in those associations' annual conferences. This is an effective way for them to increase cooperative networks and develop social capital in a wide range of settings. They believe the more association conferences an individual attends, the larger the size of the individual's social network, and the higher the possibility of obtaining resources such as information and interpersonal connections, therefore increasing their overall social capital. Many researchers (Huang, 2016; Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001; Singh, Vinnicombe, & Kumra, 2006) have confirmed that the establishment and maintenance of the network can contribute to career advancement. For the fledgling PhDs, participation in professional activities such as conferences will significantly benefit their future career development (Látková et al., 2009). ECAs seeking career advancement or social mobility at the conference also generate continuous information exchange through communication, continuously expanding and accumulating internal and external resources. This also validates Lin's concept (1999) of information being regarded as flowing capital in the network. That is, individuals can get valuable information from the network for their own actions (such as seeking jobs), and individuals can get substantial help from network members that can directly help them achieve their goals. Again, this use of social capital to obtain information from a network is most effective where the actors have high degrees of trust and closeness.

It is worth adding that similar values and a shared network may lead to a reduction in the amount of information shared. This can be a roadblock to innovation. Since the individuals who form bilateral relationship share resources with many similar people, self-enclosed networks can only provide duplicated resources. An example of this was provided by LCA_BUSf2, who found that the conference she usually attended each year no longer brought her "new things" (ideas, information, contacts). As a result, she began attending other types of conferences which she had previously not been involved with. Another example was given by a middle career academic who said that after evaluating the development of his discipline in the Asia-Pacific market, he believed it was time to impact the local academic community more significantly by participating in conferences in Europe and America (MCA_ESSf1).

Visibility can increase one's social capital and gain the international peer recognition when one publishes one's results or deepens others' academic impressions of one's field and gain recognition from the industry. The methods for approaching and obtaining such recourse can be diversified. Conference networking is divided into two forms: formal and informal. The formal networking is based on the structural relationship formed by the norms of professional knowledge and the code of conduct. The latter is more of a common understanding and conscious action which produces a series of behaviours that connect two entities in order to obtain social gains (Durbin & Tomlinson, 2010). In this sense, delegates grasp the opportunities presented by conferences to access resources that are usually difficult to access. Rather than showing up in the formal session or official social event, they appointed meeting "editors, potential reviewers, funding agencies, or department heads with open positions " (Hansen, Pedersen, & Foley, 2020,p489) at café at a time when the conference programs are being carried out. Even if they meet in a hurry, they can still leave an impression on the interested parties, and then strengthen the contact through social media, which will be more effective than sending emails without knowing each other in a large, crowed conference room but wanting to get a response. Coleman (1988) believes that when individuals are engaged in activities with a clear purpose, they not only obtain valuable information from the social network relationship but also get some substantial help in achieving their goals. Such a selective participation and absence could help them to learn, attract grants and obtain investment in projects, and recruit, so as to achieve the maximum benefit (Reychav & Te'eni, 2009; Rowe, 2019b; Storme et al., 2017).

In summary, the social capital benefits of attending conferences are significant and go much of the way in explaining why participants have been attending them for a long time. The delegates' interest in a conference stems from how an individual perceives the conference in line with their own values and goals. However, in order to effectively obtain the different social capital resources, they require from a conference, the attendance behaviours of individual delegates may vary.

5.4 Social capital and situational involvement

Whilst enduring involvement relates to a participant's sustained focus on the benefits of conferences and participation, situational involvement is more likely to reflect fluctuations in the levels of participation due to specific circumstances or stimuli (Ferns & Walls, 2012; Funk, Ridinger, & Moorman, 2004). Participants will adjust their own behaviour in a particular situation and produce different levels of attendance, in order to adapt to the current state.

Situational involvement reflects "temporary feelings of involvement that accompany a certain situation" (Richins, Bloch, & McQuarrie, 1992,p143). The data suggests there is the potential for participants to make their non-attendance decisions and take actions correspondingly. Except for a few occasions (e.g., attending a conference for the first time), the vast majority of delegates choose to participate in sessions selectively. This is because they take into account things like available time and personal energy levels to rationalise the allocation of resources to maximise the value of participation. In order to realise the greatest benefit overall, they adapt to the surrounding environment. The resulting action has particular utility, as discussed by (Coleman, 1990). This point indicates that the level of attendance during the conference is not stable but evolves with the situation. Evidence of this situational involvement is apparent in the responses of many interviewees in this study.

A temporary and transitory status (Zaichkowsky, 1986), including having no interest in the topic, getting busy with other matters, suffering physical and mental fatigue, and having other personal issues can sometimes trigger a delegate to choose not to participate in conference sessions. This may happen when a session topic is in an unrelated discipline or where the audience member is unable to understand or hear the presenter. If the information is very foreign to the listener, or is not being conveyed clearly enough, the listener's sense of belonging and shared communication with the presenter is limited (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Skills required to perform an activity (including that of understanding a presentation) have a relatively high level of situational or contextual factors (Decloe et al., 2009,p76). This may partially explain non-attendance by students who were less familiar with the topic and believed the presentation would be too "challenging" for their existing skills base (Naylor & Havitz, 2017,p168). In these cases, sessions unrelated to a student's area of research will usually be more difficult to obtain social capital from, and hence will not be seen as warranting attendance.

Most people believe the bulk of important knowledge exists in social interactions (Lang, 2004). They see informal conference activities, such as social events, as being of great potential benefit. Through close contact, they reconfigure their own tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge that the other party can understand. In the process of exchanging opinions, the two parties not only accomplish knowledge sharing but also promote cognitive consensus and trust. For this reason, some delegates prioritise the importance of social activities even ahead of formal sessions, and if there is a clash, they will opt to participate in the social event. As an additional aspect of situational involvement, delegates welcomed unexpected gains that occurred during a conference, and without planning would participate in some activities to obtain unexpected resources including learning and serendipitous networking (see more examples in Edwards et al. (2017).

When certain resources (such as irrelevant topics) were regarded as unnecessary or undesirable (Henderson, 2018), the delegate would make other arrangements for their time and energy, investing in areas they perceive as more appropriate, in order to strive for the maximum benefit of participation. Aside from being busy with the learning and networking, issues including handling urgent work and unexpected family situations often forced delegates to adjust priorities. To demonstrate this, MCA_STMf1 and MCA_STMm1 said that rather than feeling like they were there to attend a particular conference, they may simply set themselves the target of achieving a specific purpose (such as meeting with someone). In order to achieve that purpose, they will ensure they have an opportunity to talk to that person, even if they have to adjust their arrangements or miss other aspects of the conference program to do so. Others interviewed also believed the university to which they belonged was predominantly interested in the establishment of collaborations and networks of information, and made opportunities to develop these resources a priority. Based upon these examples it is not surprising that many interviewees only participated in sessions that could help them achieve particular purposes.

The change in mood due to the on-site environment of a conference is also an incentive for situational involvement (Naylor & Havitz, 2017). Negative emotions often lead to a drawback when accumulating social capital as evidenced in the story of some novice academics. These PhDs and ECAs complained that some social communities were 'closed' as they were not welcomed at the conference, making it hard to join the conversation. Even if the conference planner consciously created an environment that attempted to include students into social events, sometimes it simply did not work (Látková et al., 2009). Perhaps the idea of Portes (2000) can explain the exclusion from the group that prompts some students and ECAs to stop participating in conference sessions, thereby limiting the potential for the creation of social capital. In his view, social capital is a voluntary means of building social connections, representing trust, and actors can use shared network resources to promote their interests. However, he also points out that social capital can have negative effects, including encouraging the exclusion of outsiders and repressing the development of its members. The actual strategies which discourage outsiders from entering the community and accessing the coveted resources may be covert, and carried out unconsciously by member actors at the conference. However, they would still be likely to result in outsiders being isolated as a result of established formal and informal structural barriers. In this case, the ability to acquire and transfer capital may be limited. Therefore, these examples of inaccessibly of social capital may be partly responsible for delegates' non-attendance in certain circumstance.

Situational involvement is contextual, and the relevance and importance of activities for the individual will vary in different situations (Havitz & Mannell, 2005). Attendance patterns will therefore change as the career progresses. Many studies have shown that social capital is effective instruments for supporting vocational development to a higher position (Hassan Abubakar, Baharom Mohd, & Abdul Mutalib, 2017; Lin & Huang, 2005; Metz & Tharenou, 2001).Those who acquire social capital occupy more favourable networks and positions than those who don't. As the careers of academic's progress, their social networks develop until a relatively stable phase is reached. According to Medicamento, Wilson, Rahman, and Thompson (2010), social capital will reach a high peak in the late period of their career stage, and the social capital of academics is significantly higher than their capacity capital. Therefore, they can use the already accumulated social capital to make up for the shortage of human capital and increase their own output. These authors investigated academic staff at the University of Arizona. The associate professor and professors they studied had accumulated many years of experience in their current positions. Because of the number of years of service, they had enjoyed in the university, the relative importance of building social capital (for them) had decreased. This explains why some senior academics interviewed in this research and in other studies (Schambach & Blanton, 2001) stated they were comfortable with the status quo, and that few conference sessions aroused their interest. Many also indicated they were no longer as enthusiastic about social events as they were when entering the field, that they were satisfied with the existing social communities they had and that they were more likely to engage with people they are already familiar with. It should be noted that in this research, this conclusion is more evident in the group of male delegates (e. g. MCA_ESSm1, LCA_ESSm1 and LCA_STMm1), and that some female participants (e. g. MCA_ESSf1, LCA_BUSf1 and LCA_BUSf2) were still passionate about social networking at conferences. The results serve as a supplement to the research of Ramirez et al. (2013) who found that female attendees can be more enthusiastic about participating in social activities than male attendees.

5.5 Social capital and ego involvement

The desire for freedom and self-choice is very much related to ego involvement (Celsi & Olson, 1988). Based on personal relevance and individual intrinsic needs, delegates elected to participate in particular programs or only participated in their own presentations. They then spent more conference time on other things which interested them. BUS_ESSm2 and BUS_PhDm1 said they view the conference as a tourism-oriented activity and they plan their attendance and non-attendance prior to departure. That is, their absence is premeditated. They may also make invitations in advance to friends at the conference destination. This means the (specific) nature of conference attendance has been biased towards visiting friends, rather than developing significant social capital in terms of their career or the interests of the university. In the latter case, it has little relevance to conference participation but more private access to social capital, namely, to maintain friendship and enhance contact. Therefore, delegates are more inclined to weigh the opportunity of obtaining social capital according to their own needs than the benefits brought by the conference.

On the one hand, peer recognition as a social return is an indicator of social benefits (Kjellberg & Haider, 2019). With regard to this, the driving force for delegates to attend the conference is to achieve academic visibility or enhance their reputation in their research field through showcasing their research. To do this, they expect they will have an audience (delegates) interested in listening to their presentation. Yet interestingly they do not find it “necessary” or “feel any obligation” to attend other peoples’ presentations or act as audience members for them. Interviewees said that although they were sponsored by the university to attend the conference, they did not think it was necessary to attend the whole event. In addition, the university does not enforce any requirements around their attendance. They perceive this to mean there is no restriction or obligation for them to participate in certain aspects of the conference, and they also are under the impression that there should be no such restrictions (ECA_BUSm2). In this sense, Henderson (2018) questioned that it seemed too unilateral for Thompson et al. (2012) to generalise non-attendance as being unprofessional in their examples and criticised that the ‘time’ was granted privileges at the neoliberal university, which seemed to be too restrictive. Not only do most people think that skipping sessions is a “common” or “normal” phenomenon, participants see it as “a part of the norm”, “a self-choice”, and “up to you”. Some conference organisers have required that poster presenters be present for an amount of time and ‘punish’ those who are not present by cancelling proceedings in order to deter absences (see the example given by ECA_STMf2). However, interviewees are more likely to recommend increasing or motivating attendance via reward mechanisms.

Moreover, as PhD_STM3 explains, his conference behaviour shows a strategic pattern with career intention. In general, he only participated in the sessions he felt would be interesting or relevant to his research area if he received bursaries from his university. However, he also participated in any sessions or activities which had been funded by other parties, because he wanted to leave the hosts/organisers with a good impression. This was driven by his desire to be invited to subsequent events. There is significant evidence that students are more likely to be involved in self-directed, career-oriented activities. Thus, they aim to participate in specific programs and few believe non-attendance will have negative results.

Although most of the interviewees have shown that their attendance behaviours during conferences are predominantly purposeful and rational, not all actions are aimed at pursuing benefits unilaterally. Some delegates (e. g. ECA_ESSf2 and MCA_STMf1) said the reason they attend the same small conference for several consecutive years was that the conference gave them a sense of stability and they enjoyed seeing the familiar faces every year. They added that this allowed participants to perceive a sense of belonging at the conference. Social capital obtained via this 'denser network' which preserves group and individual resources is more the result of expressive actions (Lin, 1999). Therefore, many participants said they also perceived value in attending the same small conference – to maintain a relationship with old friends and enhance emotions by interacting again. This empirical investigation has reaffirmed that the social bonding proposed by Mock, Misener, and Havitz (2019) in the research on ego involvement, enhances the sense of belonging and well-being among members, which in turn helps increase the frequency of social event attendance.

In addition, the store and use of social capital has the characteristics of reciprocity. It is undeniable that the reason why resource providers are willing to grant favours or benefits to other parties is that they hope such an investment may help realise self-interests. Some delegates also agree that it is necessary to share resources because of morals or obligations or a sense of cohesion with a person or group. This was particularly evident in the interview with PhD_ESSm2, who agrees presenting at a conference showcases one's own research, helps you gain recognition in the professional field and improves self-confidence. But he also feels it is his obligation to share knowledge. Having communications with others, he said, gives him great pleasure, and it is apparent that such an attitude would drive attendees like him to respond positively to participating in full conference programs and interacting with others. This is in accordance with the findings on ego involvement as mirroring “some level of enjoyment” and having self-expression “being achieved through the activity” (Selin & Howard, 1988,p237).

Although ego involvement is embodied in self-purposeful and self-oriented activities, the norm also plays a critical role in shaping ego (Greenwald, 1982). In the case of a conference, if attendees are already seated, most will not leave the room impolitely, which is based on the ethical code of respect. As academics, they empathise with feelings of embarrassment which may arise if one is required to present in front of very few participants, or if people are leaving because they anticipate your presentation will be of little interest. Because of this, most will stay to support others, even if they are not interested. They also make efforts to support presentations given by friends and colleagues, even if the sessions are not related to their own area of research. Such acts of goodwill, including respect, empathy, trust and tolerance, can forge interpersonal relationships and contribute to the transformation of action, which is a crucial factor that constitutes positive social relations (Adler & Kwon, 2002). These positive emotions can lead to increased trust in peers and in the conference community in general.

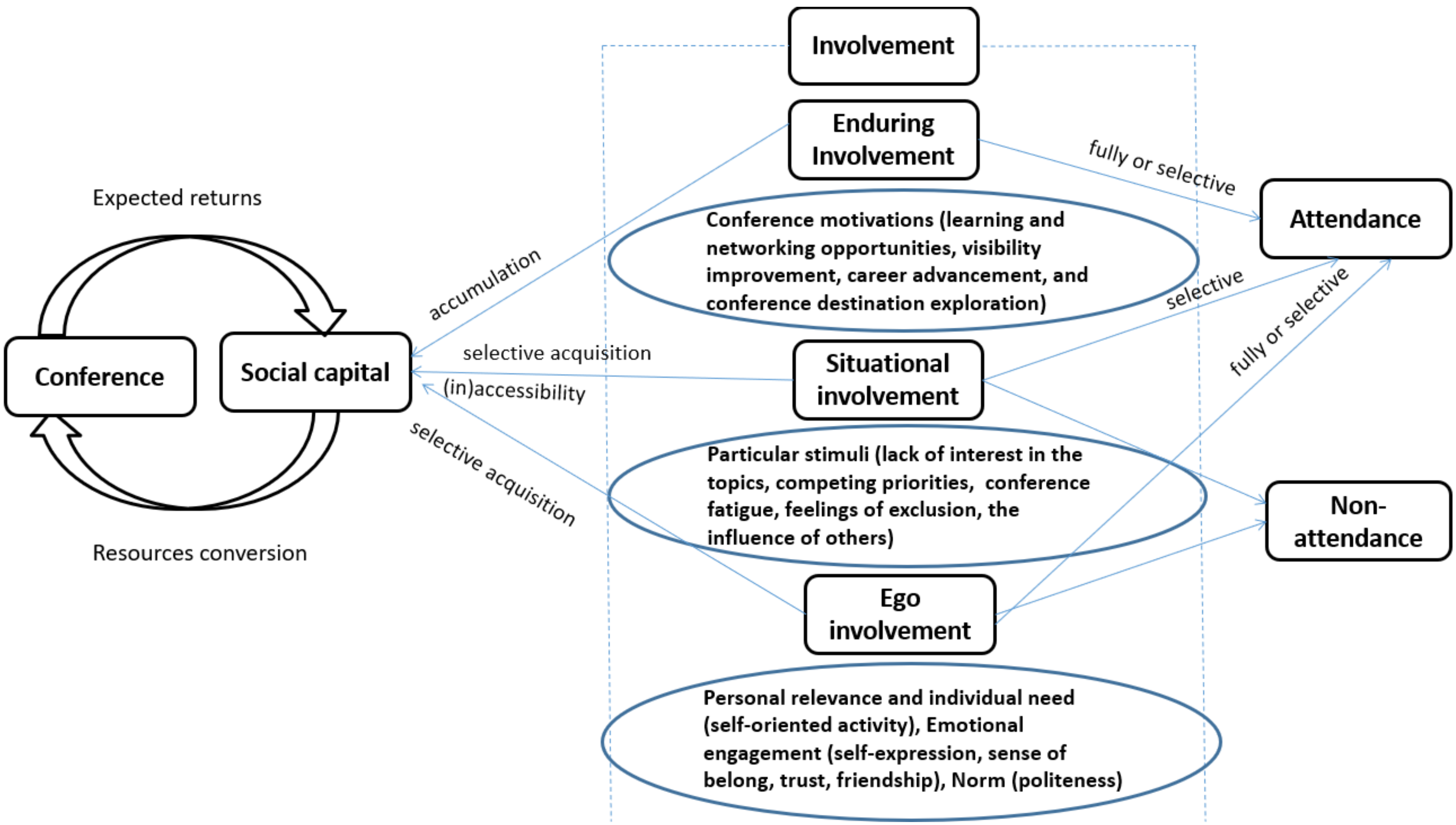
5.6 Conceptual model

These findings provide support for the links that are evident between the association conference setting, social capital, and the level of the involvement of participants. The motivation which drives students and academics to attend conferences is the potential to obtain resources. Such resources include the opportunity to attain knowledge and skills, developing collaborations and networks, and self-promotion. Those who choose to attend conferences perceive that such resources will be accessible to them via the formal and social structures of the conference. These motivations can be linked to enduring involvement that keeps the delegates interested and motivated to attend conferences over the long-term.

Most of the time, delegates pursued these resources with a purpose, so they planned well before departure, hoping to achieve the desired results. However, if they realised during the execution of the conference that their resource expectations were not likely to be achieved in the ways they had anticipated, they were willing to adjust their attendance accordingly. Selective participation in conference programs appears to be somewhat of an accepted norm. A common reason given for absence is that participants had no interest in topics that are unrelated to their own research. Also, when other factors (including competing priorities, conference fatigue, the influence of other people, scheduling changes [resulting in involuntary absences], and unpleasant feelings such as exclusion) were introduced, attendees often relinquished pursuit of such resources and chose to not participate. Apart from the stimuli encountered in the immediate environment, the degree of the delegates' devotion to the conference is also reflected in ego involvement. Whether or not they participate in the conference program is based more on utilitarian considerations and from the perspective of achieving 'self-related' and personal goals, they believe the behaviour is self-selecting. Therefore, most of the time they follow their own ideas, not only to get learning and networking opportunities but also to see conferences as a medium to achieve other goals (such as designating conferences as tourism-oriented activities or viewing conferences as a platform for self-promotion). However, not all acts are linked to interests. Self-expression, belonging to the community established at conferences also motivate delegates to devote themselves to activities that can promote emotional engagement. Moreover, delegates tend to attend small conferences with fewer people, attend local conferences with geographical advantages, and deepen mutual trust and friendship through relatively frequent contact with others. In consideration of norms such as politeness, and providing support for colleagues and friends, participants will participate sessions that they are not necessarily interested in.

Enduring involvement shows the original intention (i.e., conference participation motivation) of delegates to participate in the conference, but as the on-site situation changes, there are corresponding adjustments in emotions and actions. If their motivation or expectation is met, they will participate in the whole conference program or selectively participate specific programs. However, considering the conference's complexity, these motivation-driven delegates, even if they have arrived at the conference, have to give in to the reality of unforeseen circumstances (e.g., conference fatigue, work or family commitment) or compromise their personal preference (e.g., lack of interest, willingness of tour in the conference destination) to participate a selected program or give up some events. Therefore, it can be said that the two are interrelated. Enduring involvement and Situational/ Ego involvement can simultaneously appear for the same attendee, balanced according to the attendee's individual needs. Taken together, these findings acknowledge that the purpose of conference attendance is to obtain social capital, and attendance is the means by which that capital is obtained. Purposeful actions are then taken to obtain that capital according to the delegate's particular needs. But if the circumstances or assumptions of social capital value in certain activities at the conference change, delegates adjust their attendance behaviours accordingly. The following figure sums up this relationship.

Figure 2: Conceptual model: the relationship between conferences, social capital, involvement, and attendance and non-attendance



5.7 Chapter summary

The findings reveal that the essence of conference participation is “an investment in social relations with expected returns” (Lin, 1999,p39). In order to accumulate resources, including knowledge, networking, promotion, collaboration, and other professional goals, delegates invest time and effort in learning and establish friendly relationships with the other people at the conference. Theories of social capital and involvement were used as a theoretical lens to examine delegates’ attendance behaviour. These two concepts are related to each other, and help researchers to interpret participant attendance behaviour at conferences. They also explain (to some degree) the intrinsic and extrinsic factors which motivate or inhibit attendance. Interview data and the proposed conceptual model show that the level of involvement and the attendance/non-attendance choices made by delegates is a careful weighing of the implications of social capital. There is little difference between the attitudes of PhD students and academic staff toward attendance. This is possibly because PhD students tend to follow the lead and mirror the attitudes and behaviours of their supervisors when they are first placed in the unfamiliar environment of an academic conference. Chapter 6 discusses the potential implications of this research including theoretical and practical outcomes and suggestions for future research.

6. Conclusions and implications

This chapter summarises the research findings from interviews, and discusses implications and limitations of the research. Ways in which the research can be taken into theoretical and practical utility are presented, followed by a discussion of limitations and recommendations for future research.

6.1 Research summary

Conferences play an influential role in the career of academics. Anecdotally, most academics are aware that being absent in sessions and social events is commonplace at conferences. Surprisingly, non-attendance has been largely ignored in the literature and there are few theories offered to support an understanding of the phenomenon. The purpose of this thesis was to understand why attendees do not fully participate in conference programs, what factors inhibit or motivate participation in conference activities, how conferences can be improved to increase delegate attendance during conferences, and the implications of this research for event management theory and practice.

In order to address these aims, grounded theory methodology was applied to investigate attendee's attendance and non-attendance during conferences. Conference attendees in this research ranged from PhD students to academic staff at early, mid and late career stages. Fifteen students and 22 academic staff from STM (science, technology, medical), ESS (educational, social science) and BUS (economic and management) disciplines participated in unstructured, one-on-one personal interviews.

The key findings are summarised below:

I. What are the inhibitors and motivators for participation in conference activities?

Delegates agreed conferences helped to create and share knowledge and strengthened delegates' connections with their communities. Those conferences which receive public praise and have a high-quality program of keynote speakers of high prestige were attractive to delegates. Participants sought to realise other individual objectives within the conference setting (e.g., showcasing their research, developing confidence and professional visibility and having opportunities to learn) and beyond it (exploring the destination, resting, or visiting friends or relatives). These goals were accomplished by completing their assigned tasks (such as delivering a presentation) or selecting which sessions to participate. However, it was appropriate that attendance and involvement patterns varied according to an individual's circumstances. Reasons for absence from formal sessions or social events were varied and included having no interesting in the topics, having competing priorities, feeling physically and mentally exhausted, and having personal issues or desires (e.g., tourism). Feelings of social exclusion from the conference community influenced attendance at social events more than formal sessions.

II. How do academics perceive their non-attendance during a conference?

On the one hand, interviewees felt the value and benefits conferences offered warranted attendance. On the other hand, many participants questioned the necessity of participating the whole program. This was because they felt individual delegates had different needs and motivations for attending the conference, all of which could not necessarily be met through full attendance at conference sessions. With the freedom to make such choices, non-attendance at conferences was referred to as a "common", "normal" phenomenon and a "personal choice" for themselves and others. In the face of this situation, most interviewees in this study did not expect to fully participate future conferences.

III. Are there similarities or differences in what motivates the PhD student and an academic to not participate certain aspects of a conference program?

There is little difference in attendance and non-attendance between students and academics at various career stages.

One aim of this research was to generate theories regarding non-attendance during the conference. Following the data analysis, the researcher founded that the nature of conference participation is driven by the desire to accumulate social capital and the level of involvement is revealed as a complication to attendance and non-attendance at the conference. Different levels of involvement match different levels of access to social capital by attendees. Therefore, whether attendees will be absent during the conference program can be explained through use of these two theories. Implications emerging from this research include theoretical and managerial perspectives.

6.2 Theoretical implications

Updating knowledge and proposing corresponding theories is vital for conference stakeholders to further understand attendees (Cassar et al., 2020). When researchers investigate conference participation, they focus heavily on the periods prior to a conference (decision-making and the understanding of motivations or barriers to participation) and the post-conference period (evaluations of satisfaction, or intention to return). Participation *during* the conference, however, is generally overlooked. Whilst touching on attendance decisions in the pre- and post-conference phases, this thesis also highlights delegate attendance and non-attendance behaviour *during* a conference. In this way, it complements the existing research and fills a gap in the literature.

The unstructured interviews gave participants the opportunity to talk freely. Voices from different career stages and disciplines were utilised to more fully reflect the range of thoughts and opinions of academics and students on association conferences. The grounded theory approach led to the emergence of two theoretical themes: social capital and involvement theory. Social capital theory provides insight into ways in which delegates use conferences to develop social capital for themselves and also their institutions, expanding crucial domestic and international networks that support careers and the reputations of universities. Yet, these networks rely on the involvement of delegates in the conference activities and findings indicate that involvement is an area of concern as many attendees report considerable non-attendance. The concepts of enduring involvement, situational involvement and ego involvement provide a useful context for understanding delegate behaviours in relation to attendance and non-attendance at conference sessions and social events.

Prior to this, studies associated with involvement theory appear most commonly in the leisure context. This research is unique in applying it to a non-leisure activity, and filling a theoretical gap. In addition, most previous studies have focused on social capital and acquired social resources in sports setting, (e.g. Schulenkorf, Thomson, and Schlenker (2011) Park, Cottingham, and Seo (2018) Zhou and Kaplanidou (2018). There has been little or no literature on the role of social capital in the conference setting. The added value of this research is that it has extended the development of social capital through participation of delegates, thus providing new ideas for exploration of social capital within the event context.

This study combines social capital theory and situational involvement theory to create a conceptual model, which contributes to the event literature. It considers the importance of understanding the motivations, intentions and needs of participants attending conferences, their different degrees of involvement during the conference, and how the conference aligns with their goals. It has also identified terms used to describe such behaviour and the attitudes student and academic delegates hold toward attendance and non-attendance. These theoretical paradigms have provided a lens through which to view the behaviour and have a contribution to event management literature.

6.3 Practical implications

This study also has a number of implications for planners, organisers and managers of conferences and their stakeholders. These stakeholders include delegates, their supporting institutions and associations, convention centres and tourism bureau.

- For conference delegates

Findings indicate the end consumers of conferences (delegates) are a diverse blend of individuals with a range of unique factors that affect attendance behaviour. Those at different stages of their career seek to derive different (social capital) resources from conferences, and in differing amounts. Doctoral students and early career researchers tend to be seen as being lower in status in the academic conference environment. Their sessions are less favoured, and their presentations are often programmed at the end of the day or the end of the conference. As a result, they can be less involved, and social capital benefits to be gained from their interactions are reduced. With this in mind, there is clearly potential to make conference programs more inclusive of junior scholars and to recognise their contributions. As Chapman et al. (2009,p18) stated, conference organisers should “see student perspectives and identify student needs as part of planning processes.” They should design programs to encourage delegate attendance and participation in conferences and create a suitable environment to ensure the generation of widespread social capital benefit. In so doing, they could ensure that all delegates could enjoy positive experiences at conferences and develop a sense of belonging in the environment which could remain with them throughout their academic career.

- For funding institutions

These results also have direct implications for institutions that fund conference attendance. Interactive cooperation and integration between institutions promotes the transfer and sharing of knowledge and skills and forms the creative behaviour of universities. In this sense, universities encourage staff and students to attend conferences in order to utilise them as a platform for developing and benefitting from mutual relationships and long-term, co-operative exchanges with various external entities. Conferences are unique social communities which offer a platform for the development of social capital, but one has to participate in the corresponding activities to be able to obtain the resources that make up that capital. Participating in conference sessions allow delegates to acquire social capital via presentations, meetings with known contacts, the forming of new networks or associations, peer recognition, opportunities for career enhancement, and collaborative opportunities with external bodies/groups.

Importantly, the need to develop social capital can be perceived differently by academics at difference career stages. For instance, many PhDs do not have much knowledge of the purpose of the university being represented at a conference, and as a result this objective may not be adequately achieved. Only as they progress through the ranks of academia does it become apparent to them that conference activities can be of benefit to the sponsoring institutions.

It is anticipated that this research will provide advice and assistance to students enrolled in higher degree research study programs, their supervisors and the fund providers (sponsors) by educating students on this aspect of their involvement in academic activity. As a supplement to the PhD training program, faculties could use information contained within this study to provide students with expectations and guidance based on their own discipline settings. Alternatively, faculties might consider using excerpts to provide simple training or counselling for students who have had no prior experience of conferences. This may help students be more prepared prior to attendance and may help them select sessions more effectively or deal with unpleasant experiences more easily. They can plan strategies which may help them 'break the ice' in social events, enabling them to gain maximum benefit and enjoyment from attendance.

When delegates return from the conference, a small networking session can be organised by the faculty. This kind of reflection motivates the delegates to participate more actively in more sessions and social events in order to make a good report. They bring back new knowledge and skill and physical material (Choi, 2014) and share stories with colleagues, which consolidates what they have gained from attending the conference. In this way, the small gathering within the faculty also becomes a good summary and continuation of the conference, which injects new knowledge into the faculty and increases the staff's cohesion through the exchange of experience. Other colleagues will also benefit from this and feel the charm of the conference and feel valued and motivated to attend the conference.

- For meeting planners and conference organizers

The results provide an empirical basis and a broader understanding for meeting planners and conference organisers to guide conference design and marketing promotion. Although participants may have a positive attitude towards conferences in general, the study found that some early researchers found that conferences also left them with unpleasant experiences because of different treatment they received. Often this was a product of being seen as being 'less worthy' by more senior researchers, and inhibited delegates from participating in the conference more fully.

Non-attendance is a tacit phenomenon during conferences. Reduced attendance during the conference will cause attendees to question whether the conference is successful and affect whether they will attend the same conference in the future. Thus, it is important for organisers to raise concerns and understand the phenomenon of non-attendance. It will enable them to design events that help delegates take advantage of the conference offerings, increase delegate participation and contribute positively to the conference atmosphere. This might include creating more lively social interactions and places for informal learning that are more attractive for attendees, and which will capture and maintain their attention and their attendance. Another opportunity may be to provide associated services that enrich the overall conference experience. For instance, all of the literature focuses heavily on motivation on conference participation or impacts, but most ignore the end-user's emotional impacts. A few studies point out that delegates experience positive emotions as a gain from attending the conference (e.g., Choi (2013), Ryu&Lee, 2013 Casad et; al (2016). However, there is not much awareness of any negative emotions produced in conference settings. Negative emotions (e.g., social discomfort) may be intangible and/or invisible to others, yet may lead delegates to form negative perceptions of the conference and influence their attendance patterns negatively. This research fills a research gap and provides conference organisers and meeting planners with a multi-faceted understanding of what delegates want and need and valuable recommendations for them to process improvement to the delegates. For example, regarding the arrangement for the attendance of ECAs, proper adjustment of session order will help them gain more attention; the session chair can effectively help steer the session, arousing delegates' enthusiasm. Considering the unique characteristic of the conference, delegates are not only satisfied with gains obtained from the session but also hope to get new opportunities and gain new partnership and friendship through serendipitous activities such as informal session.

In sum, the specific comments provided by interviewees are based on their own personal experiences, and can give organisers a deeper understanding of how the conference experience is perceived by delegates. Through an in-depth understanding of participation attitudes and needs of delegates at various stages of their careers, event promoters and marketers will be better able to target core consumers, maximise promotional activities and differentiate themselves in the increasingly competitive event industry.

- For convention centres and tourism bureau

Convention centres and tourism bureau would benefit from the research by gaining insight into ways they can develop of the local tourism offerings. Findings show that if attendees were not interested in the session and had freedom from other commitments (e.g., work or family), the most common choice they made instead of participating in the conference program was to visit the local area for sightseeing. However, where conference organisers can partner with local tourism operators to create high-value and integrated programs where such tourism needs are met without requiring sessions to be missed, mutually beneficial concepts can be coordinated. Although many conferences have pre- and post-tour arrangements included in their programs, in most cases the tourism and conference elements are separated. In the example given by one interviewee (LCA_STMm2), a brilliant combination of conference and local tourism was demonstrated where the opportunity to experience local attractions for delegates who were unable to extend their profile stay was offered.

6.4 Limitations and suggestions for future research

This research does, however, have a number of limitations. Firstly, the thesis only considered students and academics as conference attendees. This might result in a bias towards a sampling selection. Therefore, the conference experience in other delegate categories (for example industry practitioners) may be different. In additional, targeting academics from a single-category professional institution (‘universities’ in this research) also limited the sample size. Further study is needed to explore the experiences of delegates from other types of institutions. Secondly, the subject of the study was association conference attendees, but it did not consider whether they were members of an association. Improvements might consider the option of using membership of an association as a prerequisite to further explore whether - and to what extent – membership impacts participation.

Another consideration for future research is that most association conferences are attended voluntarily. Other conferences and business events may reflect different patterns of participation given that attendance is perhaps being viewed as an alternative to paid work hours (e.g., for government, industry and corporate conferences). More specifically, as introduced in the literature review, government and corporate conferences are generally organised by an official organisation and require mandatory attendance. This kind of constraint may influence delegates' performance and attendance. Therefore, for 'passive' forms of attendance, it may not be appropriate to apply this study across the board.

No one among the interviewees spoke extensively about the topic of alcohol. Even though one or two participants mentioned it in passing when discussing social networking, the relationship between non-attendance and alcohol at conferences was not discussed in the follow-up conversation. In future research, alcohol can be used as a variable to test whether it affects people missing social events because they don’t drink or are overwhelmed by drunken socialising. Further research may also encompass aspects of the diversity of attendees (e. g. the experience of participants with disabilities) and the possibility of whether elements like climate change (carbon footprint), and resourcing levels of conferences have an impact on conference attendance. There is no related content of the exhibition conference in the interview, so the type of conference (space with exhibition) has not been included in this thesis.

Finally, this analysis has been based upon the author's personal understanding. It has also incorporated a purely qualitative methodological approach to data collection. The key factors generated in the research could be applied as a base line to design a questionnaire to support quantitative investigation. A mixed method (qualitative and quantitative) would capture delegates’ conference attendance and non-attendance more broadly. Further research into the role of conferences in contributing to university progression and the development of social capital is required. Universities encourage staff and students to attend conferences and to use them as a platform to build relationships through long-term exchanges and cooperation with various external entities for mutual benefit. Social capital can be accumulated in these relationships, thereby creating a positive trend of internal and external interaction and collaborative development which enhances the university’s competitive advantage. From this perspective, members of institutions are not the only ones who profit from the benefits of attendance mentioned above. Further research examining how social capital flows from the conference to the university at the institutional level warrants attention, as does the investigation of ways of measuring social capital accumulation at conferences.

Other important questions future research may seek to address are：

- Whether low attendance rates during a conference program impact delegates’ goal, and if so, how?

- What impact(s) non-attendance at conferences has on an event's potential to be leveraged for benefits?

- Are there ways to engage audiences and possibly enhance attendance during conference?

- What insights could the findings of this thesis provide to the impact of virtual and hybrid meetings on conference attendance?

This thesis provides a new research perspective for the study of conference attendance and non-attendance. Despite leaving several related questions unanswered and additional research to be done, insights from this research will assist other researchers to delve more deeply into delegate attendance behaviours at association conferences.

6.5 Epilogue

As an epilogue to the research journey and the making of this thesis, I would like to share 'my' conference story in the first person. During and after the writing process, I have attended several international conferences. More than ten hours of flight, chaotic jetlag, the fatigue after arriving at the conference destination.... all of these things had an impact. Nevertheless, when deciding between participating in an online or on-site conference, on-site participation is preferred; when choosing between attending a local or an international conference, the latter is chosen as much as possible. (Thanks to the benevolent conference fund provided by the UTS.) My participation process is not much different from those interviewed: selectively participating in specific engaging sessions, or giving up the previous session to prepare for the next presentation of their own. After the presentation, I rushed to meet up with friends or colleagues arranged in advance, found places to chat with other participants inside the venue, and we occasionally left early together to explore the surroundings. Of course, as a poor PhD student, sometimes we have to consider the budget, and when the food provided by the conference is good, we will consider staying at the conference. This also significantly improves the possibility of participating in more sessions to spare time or being more motivated to stay. Participants are not likely to leave if there is food for thoughts as well as for the stomach (Lee, 2008).

At the metro station near the conference venue, delegates who have met each other on different days or in different sessions often met. We smiled at each other and got on the metro of different routes, heading to different destinations (tourist attractions mostly) at a time when other sessions or closing ceremony were in progress - the attendance of these programs could be predictable. Another interesting phenomenon is that there were children of all ages sitting in rows on the chairs outside the session room; and their accompanying carers (often parents) change into casual clothes after the presentation, transforming from the identity of scholars to that of parents in an instant, and hurrying to take them to the theme park. Later, learnt through informal conversation, these delegates chose to attend the conference in this city because it was the time of summer vacation. There was such a platform to help them achieve external communication (some scholars carry the university's mission and need to publish the milestones or make international communication every year). At the same time, they did not have to leave their care responsibilities behind and could take their children on an overseas vacation. It was to achieve many things at one stroke.

When asked whether they gained anything when they had missed many parts of the conference, most of the scholars said they were used to this kind of tight schedule during the conference period and had made arrangements in advance before attending. Although involvement was limited or phased and focused, the set goals were accomplished during the short participation – they showcased their research, learnt something new, built relationships, and increased visibility in the field. Even if it was due to the itinerary, some achievements were slightly insufficient (for example, if one stay at the conference for a short time, one might miss the session or miss the opportunity to learn knowledge or make friends with more people). However, they were convinced that they have achieved their primary goals, accumulated social capital, and developed a fixed style of attendance and non-attendance, which they continued in every conference they attended. They firmly believed that a face-to-face conference is still difficult to be replaced.

While for me, when I saw contact details and name cards from someone who I had met for the first time, as well various tourist souvenirs that were taken home, I was reminded of the fact that I did not participate in the conference session completely and I started to reflect on my participation. Did I gain something in return for my participation? Yes, I did. I presented my research, drew new inspiration from the feedback and informal talk, and deepened my connection with old and new friends from different countries. More importantly, I had fun at the conferences. Will I skip sessions or social events in the future? Yes, I will. A serendipity of learning and unexpected resources can be occurred during formal or informal occasion. Perhaps this is why academics attend conferences tirelessly but absent from some of the programs from time to time.

All in all, conference is “a meeting of minds, networks and friendships, serendipitous discoveries occur which lead to many benefits for society” (Edwards et al. (2017,p143).

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview questions example

- **Interview reference number:**
- **Name:**
- **Date and time of interview:**
- **Interview location:**

1. **Background questions**

The background questions part collects the general data about participants' personal and professional characteristics, including gender, age, discipline, length of time in that career, etc.

First, could you tell me a bit about your personal and professional background?

- **Gender**

Ⅰ Female Ⅱ Male Ⅲ Other (please state), ____________________

- **Age group**

Ⅰ 20-29 Ⅱ 30-39 Ⅲ 40-49 Ⅳ 50-59 Ⅴ 60- Older than 60

- **Institution**

Ⅰ University of Technology Sydney (Hughes & Deutsch) Ⅱ University of Sydney (USYD)

Ⅲ University of New South Wales (UNSW) Ⅳ Macquarie University (UMQ)

Ⅴ Western Sydney University (UWS) Ⅵ Other (please state), ____________

- **What discipline are you in?**

Ⅰ STM (Science, Technology, Medical)

Ⅱ ESS (Education, Social Sciences)

Ⅲ BUS (Economics, Management)

- **What career stage are you in?**

Ⅰ PhD student

Ⅱ Early career stage

Ⅲ Middle career stage

Ⅳ Late career stage

- **Any additional information:**

2. Entering questions

A conversation will start with interviewees' conference experience. (The researcher will leave the participants open to narrate something of their own story.)

Now I would like to talk with you in general about your conference experiences.

- Tell me about your first conference.
- Tell me about your most recent conference.
- Could you describe a typical day at (your most recent) conference?

- Do you see yourself as a frequent conference attendee who participates in two or more conferences per year?

(If "Yes") what does this "frequent conference attendance" mean to you?
(If "No"), why not?

- Do you pay attendance expenses by yourself?

Prompt question: (If your institution or other fund provider sponsors your conference trip) why does that institution pay for you to attend the conferences?

Prompt question: What is the institution's expectation in terms of your conference outcome?

3. **Intermediate questions**

Asking for participants' personal stance in the discussion, including interviewees' (positive or unwanted) experiences in relation to their conference motivations and expectations, individual reason(s) for not participating formal sessions/social events, and their attitude towards the non-attendance.

- What do you find most valuable in attending the conference? Tell me some impressive (good or bad) stories happing in the conferences.
- How would you describe a good conference? Could you please give us some examples? (e. g. programs, speakers, environment, etc.)
- Do you always stay at whole conference (including formal sessions and social events carried out during the course of the scheduled conference)?

(If not) Prompt question: Why did you choose not to participate those sessions/ networking events? Prompt question: Do think there was some possibility that you miss these things because you did not participate?

Prompt question: What kind of activities did you do in place of participating sessions or social activities at conferences?

Prompt question: What is the biggest difference between your previous conference and the conference you attend now? (e. g. attendance strategy (if any), attitude towards your attendance, etc.)

Prompt question: In what ways does this kind of strategy or attitude affect your participation at conferences?

- Do you think many people missed some of the sessions/ social activities at conferences? (If so,) tell me more about people around you who missed sessions/ social activities.
- How do you feel about people who missed sessions or social activities?

4. **Closing questions**

Question example: suggestions

- What role do you think the conference organiser(s) should play, if any, in promoting full attendance at conference sessions and social events?

- How do you see the future conference?

Question example: additional information

- After reflecting on your conference experiences, is anything else you would like to add?
- Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Question example: snowball sampling

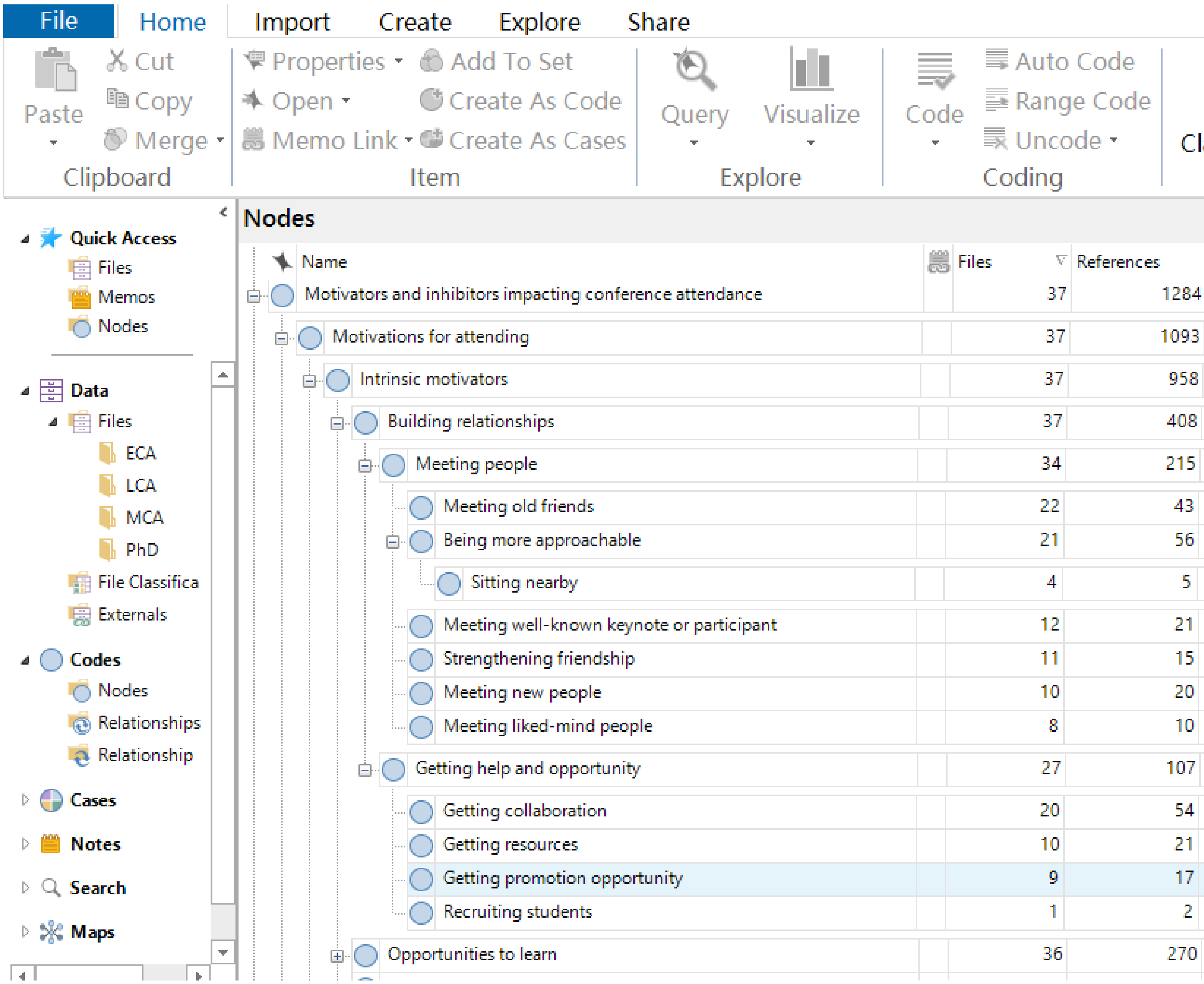
- Prompt question: Do you know anyone else who might like to be interviewed?

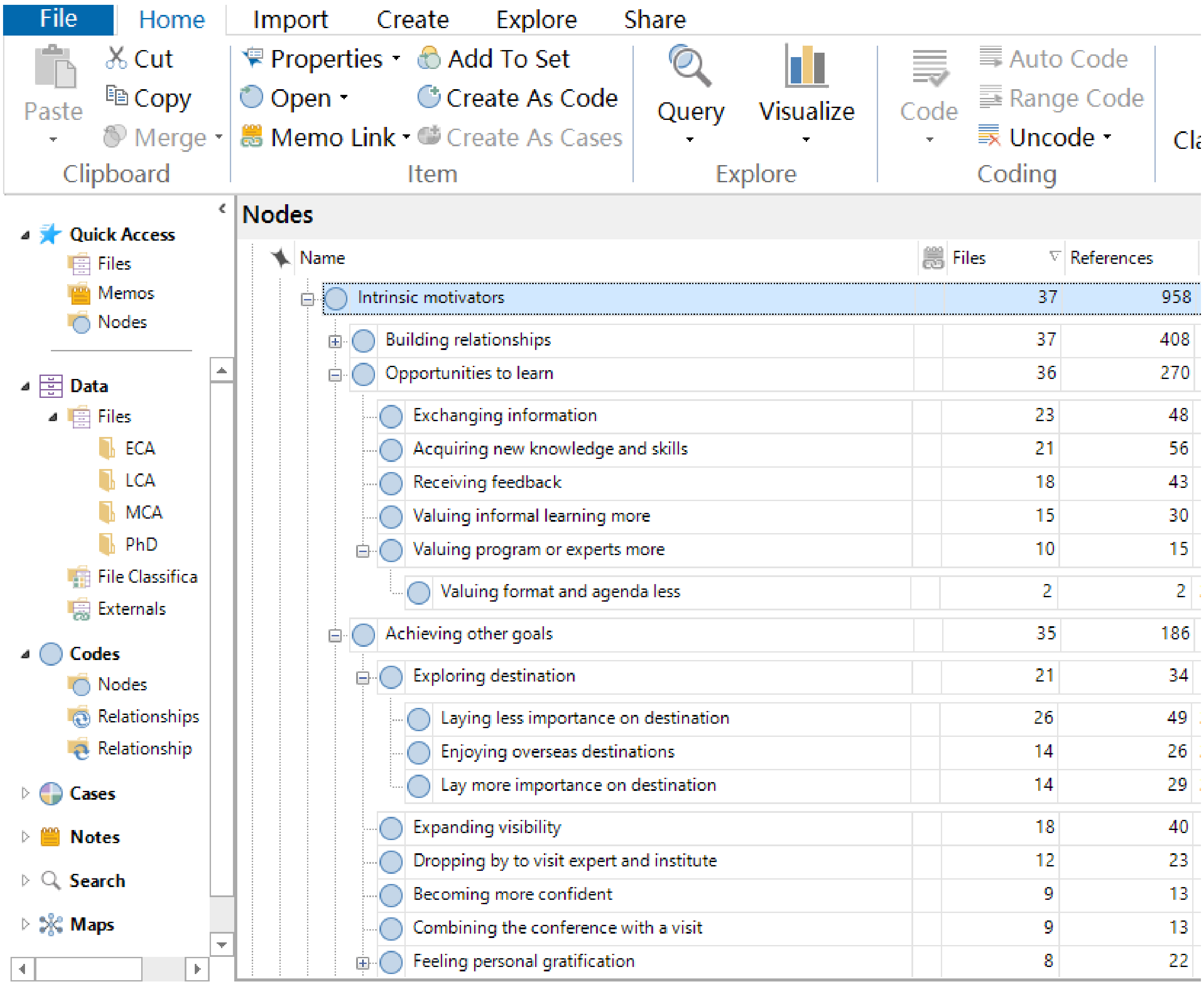
Thank you very much for your time.

*** It is well to remember that the interview process will be guided by interviewees, therefore, the questions presented may vary with the individual and situation.

Appendix 2: Data analysis via NVivo

Stage 1: Motivations and inhibitors to conference attendance

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Achieving other goals 35 186
Exploring destination 21 34
Laying less importance on destination 26 49
Enjoying overseas destinations 14 26
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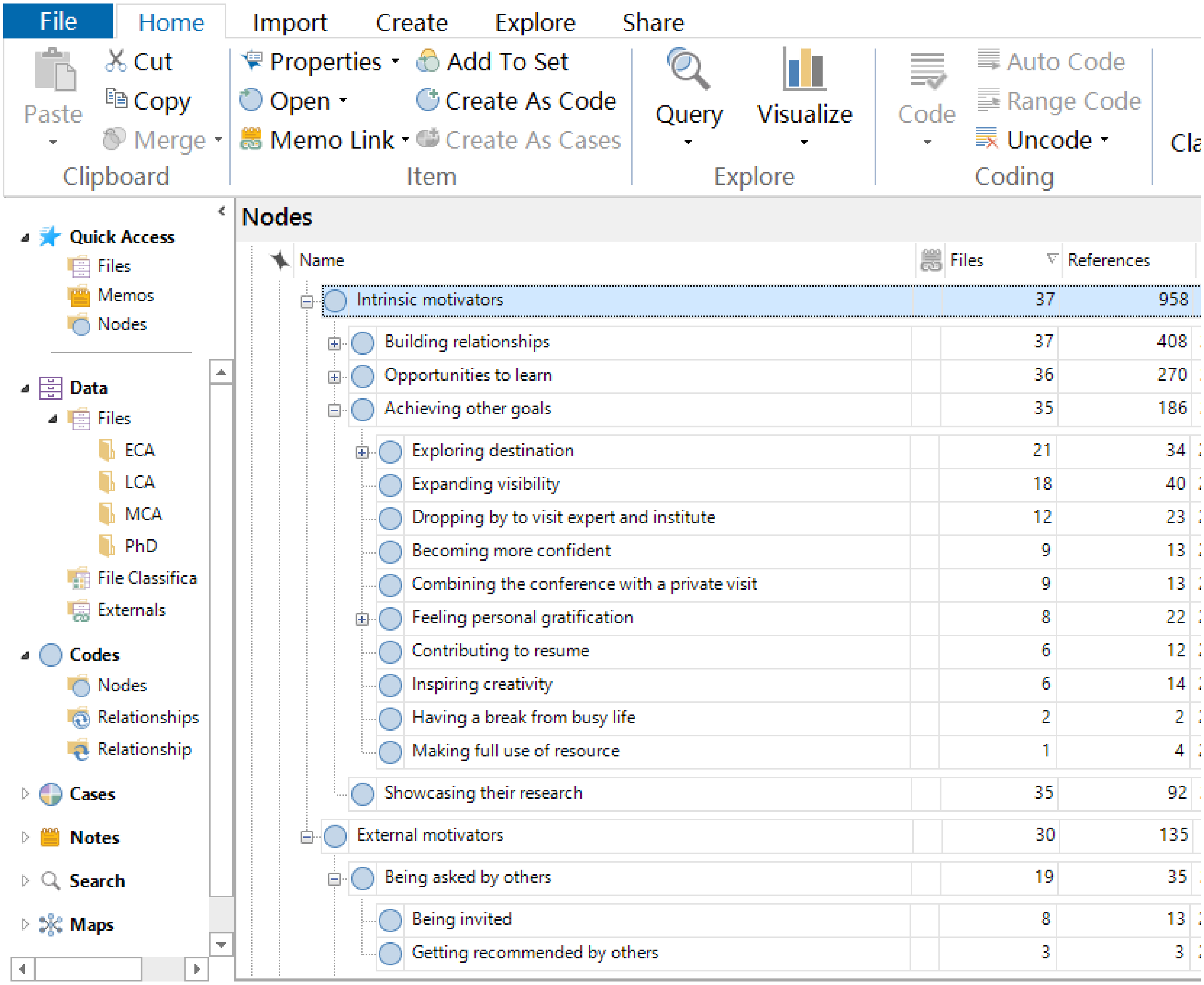
Becoming more confident 9 13
Combining the conference with a visit 9 13
Feeling personal gratification 8 22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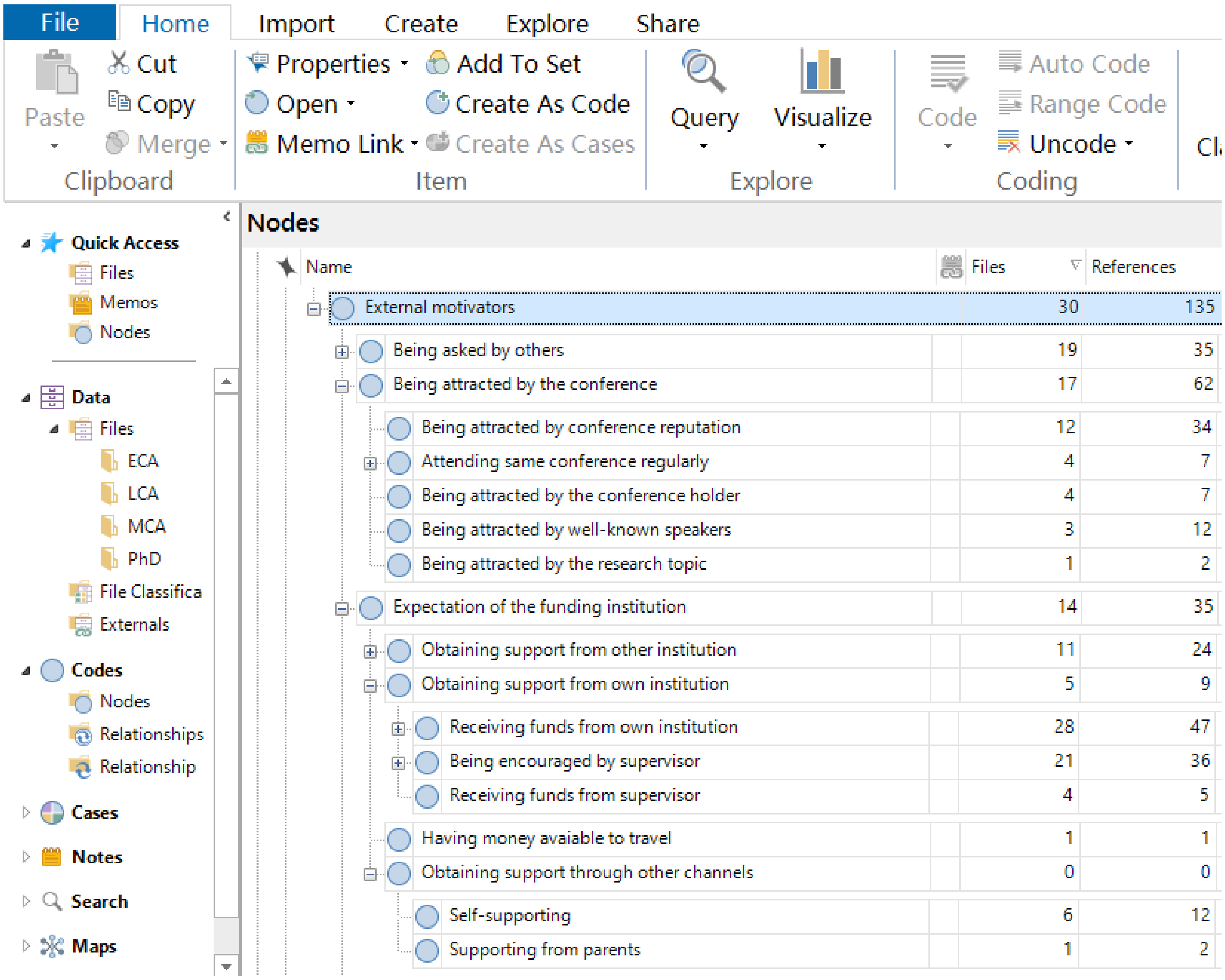
Building relationships 37 408
Opportunities to learn 36 270
Achieving other goals 35 186
Exploring destination 21 34
Expanding visibility 18 40
Dropping by to visit expert and institute 12 23
Becoming more confident 9 13
Combining the conference with a private visit 9 13
Feeling personal gratification 8 22
Contributing to resume 6 12
Inspiring creativity 6 14
Having a break from busy life 2 2
Making full use of resource 1 4
Showcasing their research 35 92
External motivators 30 135
Being asked by others 19 35
Being invited 8 13
Getting recommended by others 3 3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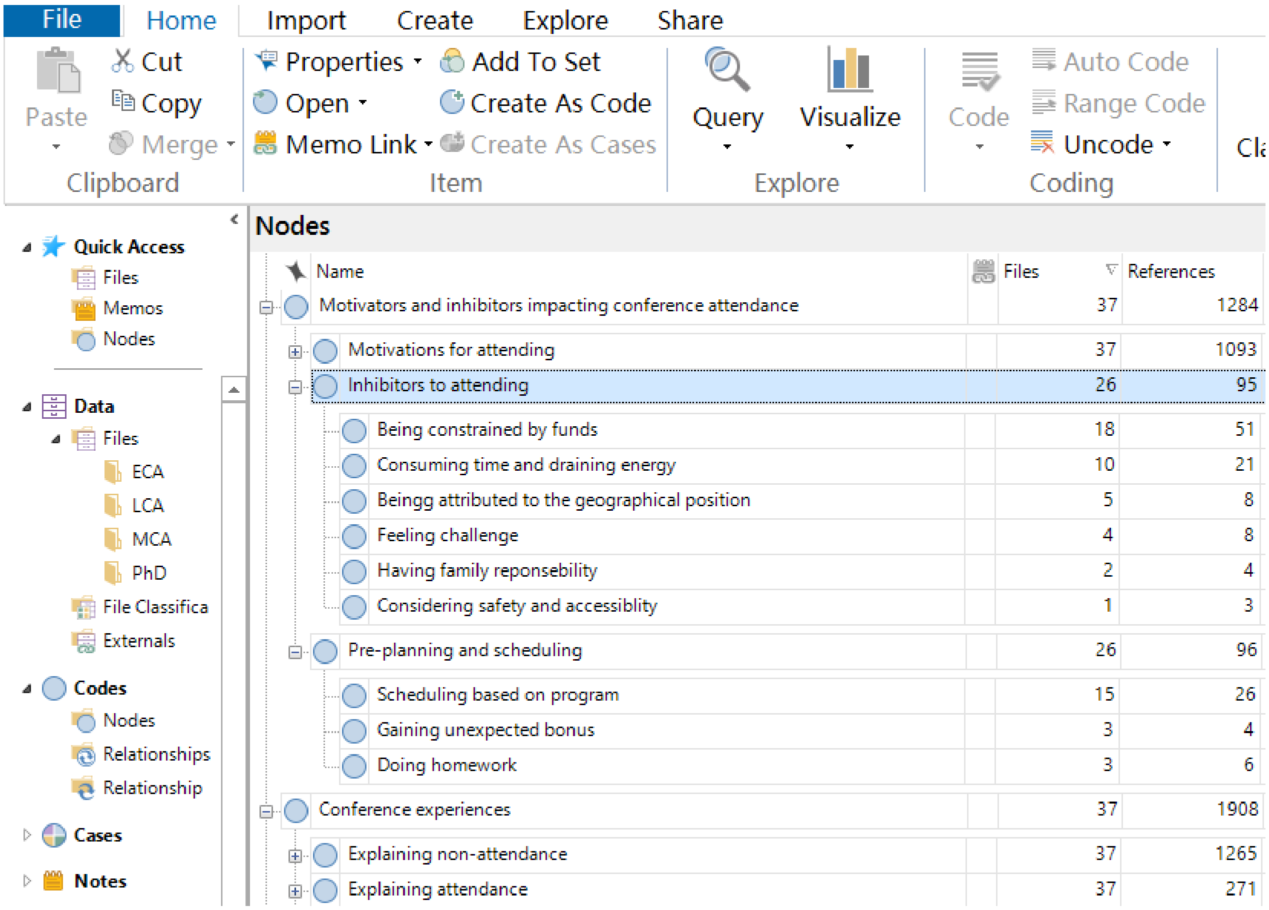
External motivators 30 135
Being asked by others 19 35
Being attracted by the conference 17 62
Being attracted by conference reputation 12 34
Attending same conference regularly 4 7
Being attracted by the conference holder 4 7
Being attracted by well-known speakers 3 12
Being attracted by the research topic 1 2
Expectation of the funding institution 14 35
Obtaining support from other institution 11 24
Obtaining support from own institution 5 9
Receiving funds from own institution 28 47
Being encouraged by supervisor 21 36
Receiving funds from supervisor 4 5
Having money avaiable to travel 1 1
Obtaining support through other channels 0 0
Self-supporting 6 12
Supporting from parents 1 2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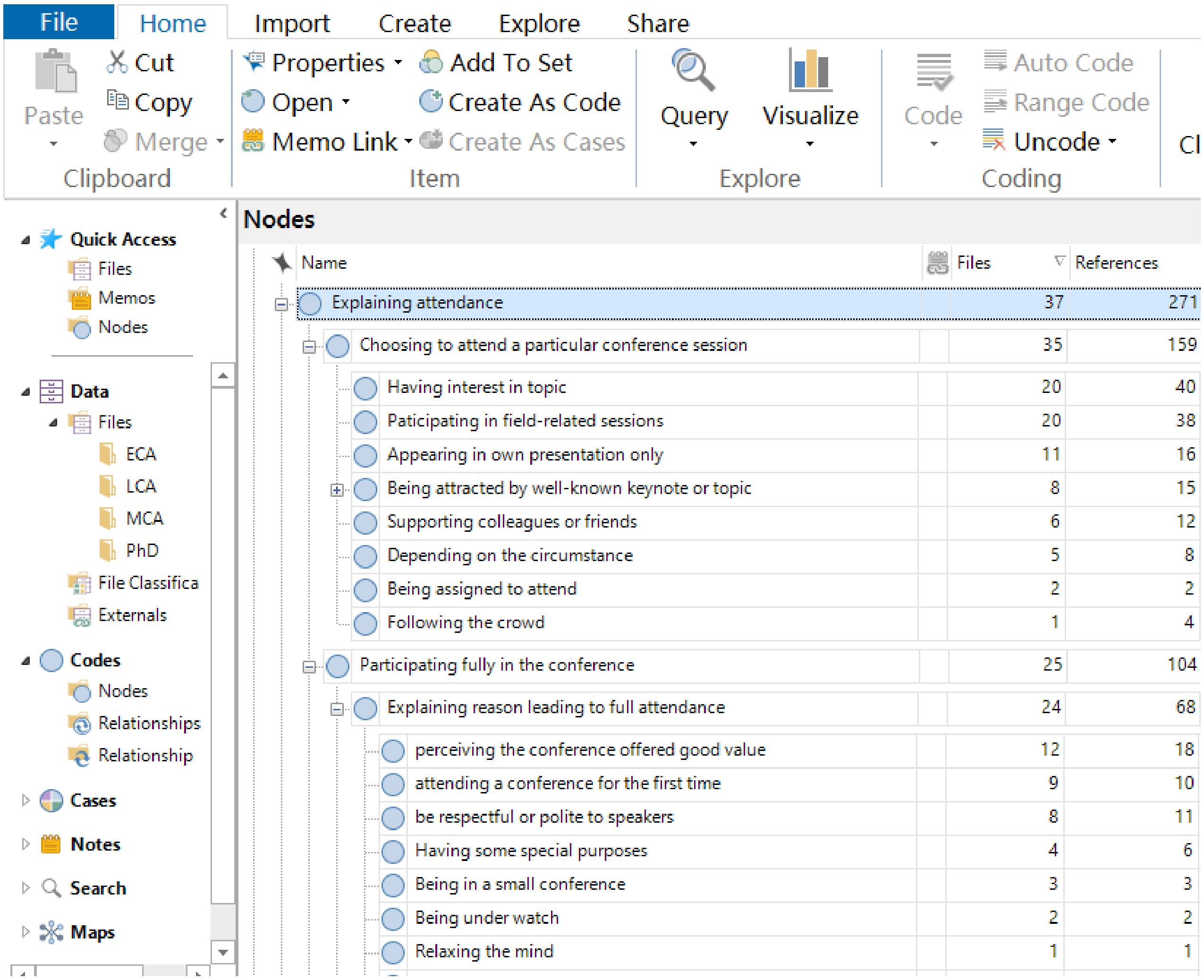
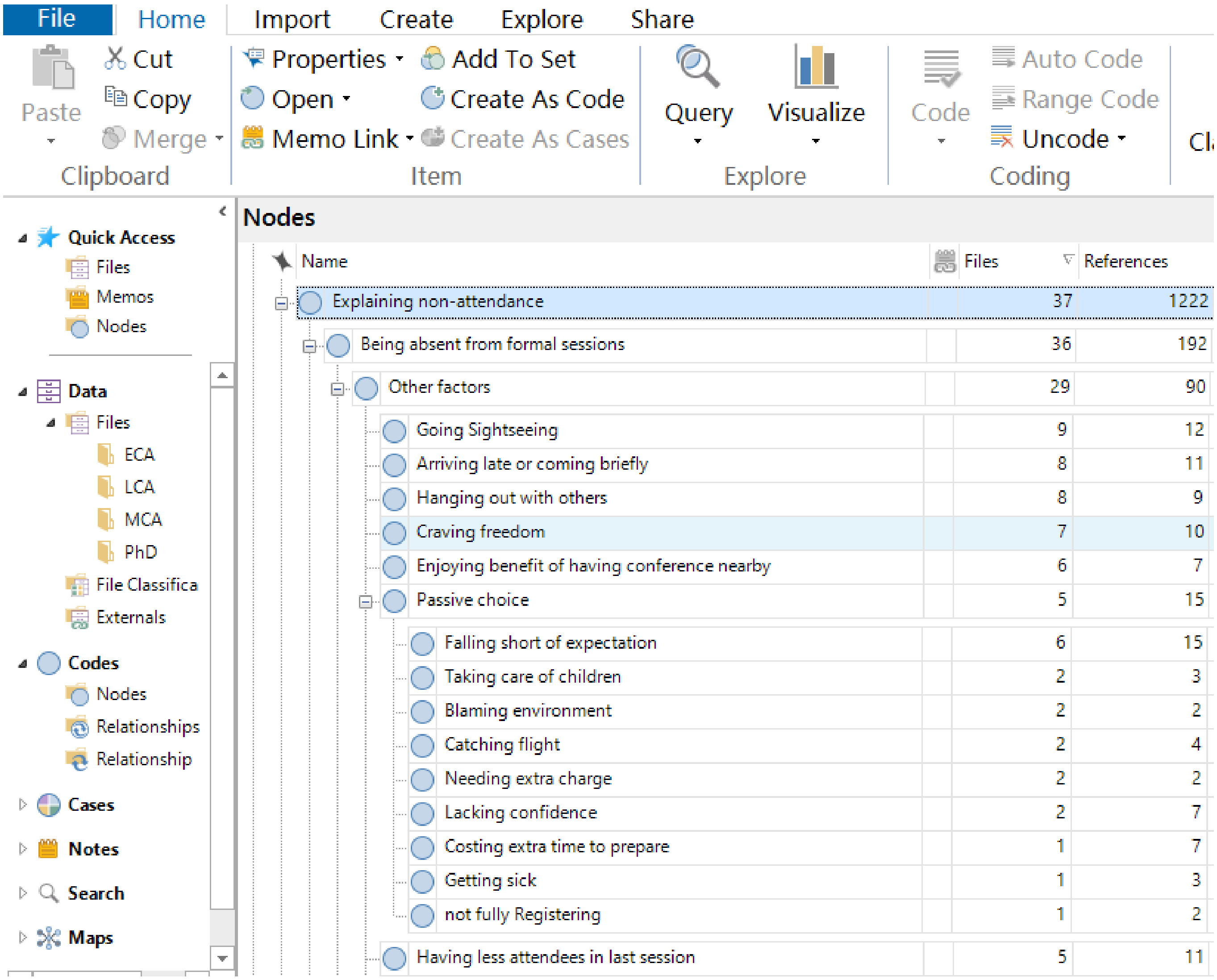
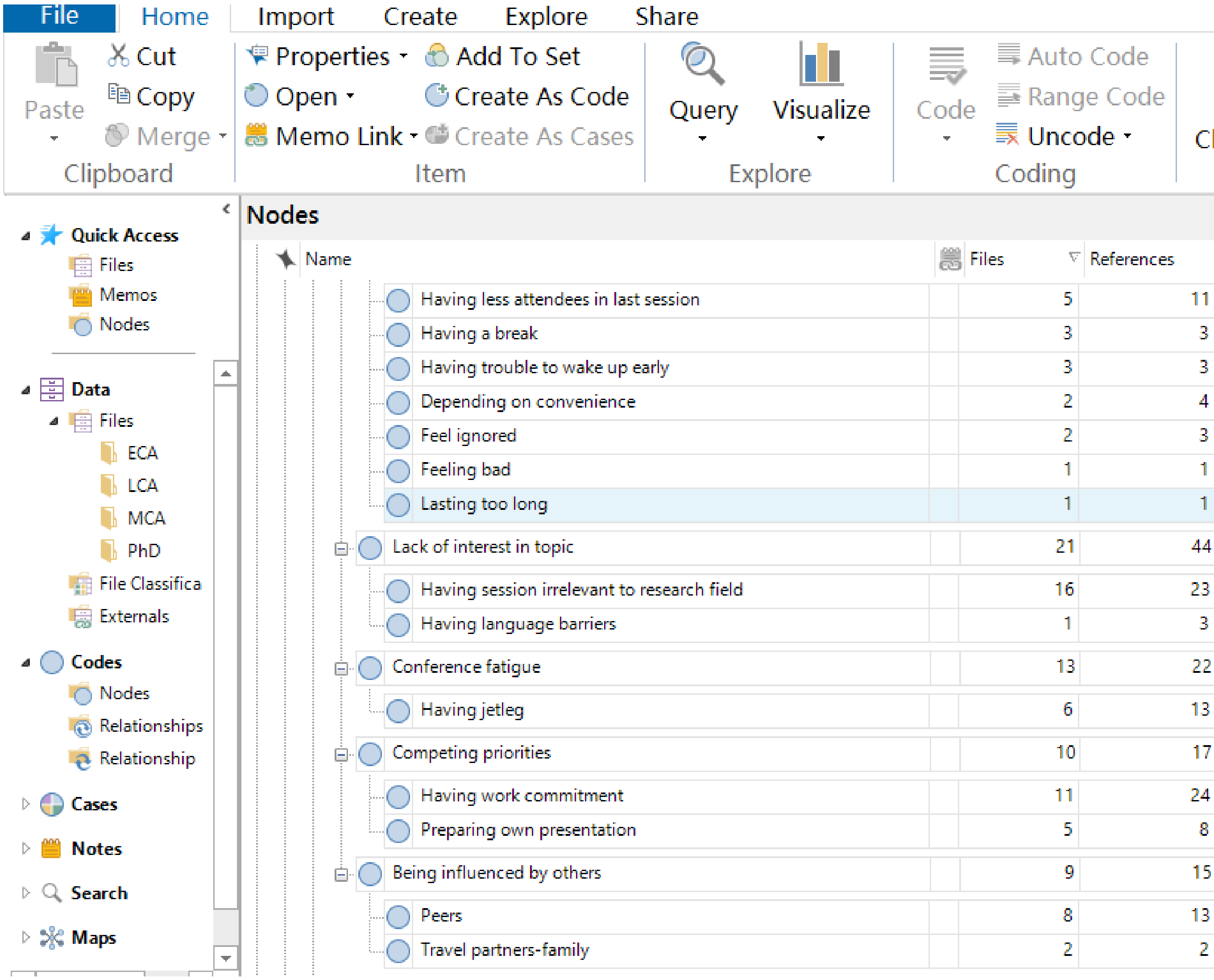
Motivators and inhibitors impacting conference attendance 37 1284
Motivations for attending 37 1093
Inhibitors to attending 26 95
Being constrained by funds 18 51
Consuming time and draining energy 10 21
Beingg attributed to the geographical position 5 8
Feeling challenge 4 8
Having family reponsebility 2 4
Considering safety and accessiblity 1 3
Pre-planning and scheduling 26 96
Scheduling based on program 15 26
Gaining unexpected bonus 3 4
Doing homework 3 6
Conference experiences 37 1908
Explaining non-attendance 37 1265
Explaining attendance 37 271

Stage 2: attendance at conference(s)



Stage 2: non-attendance at conference(s)

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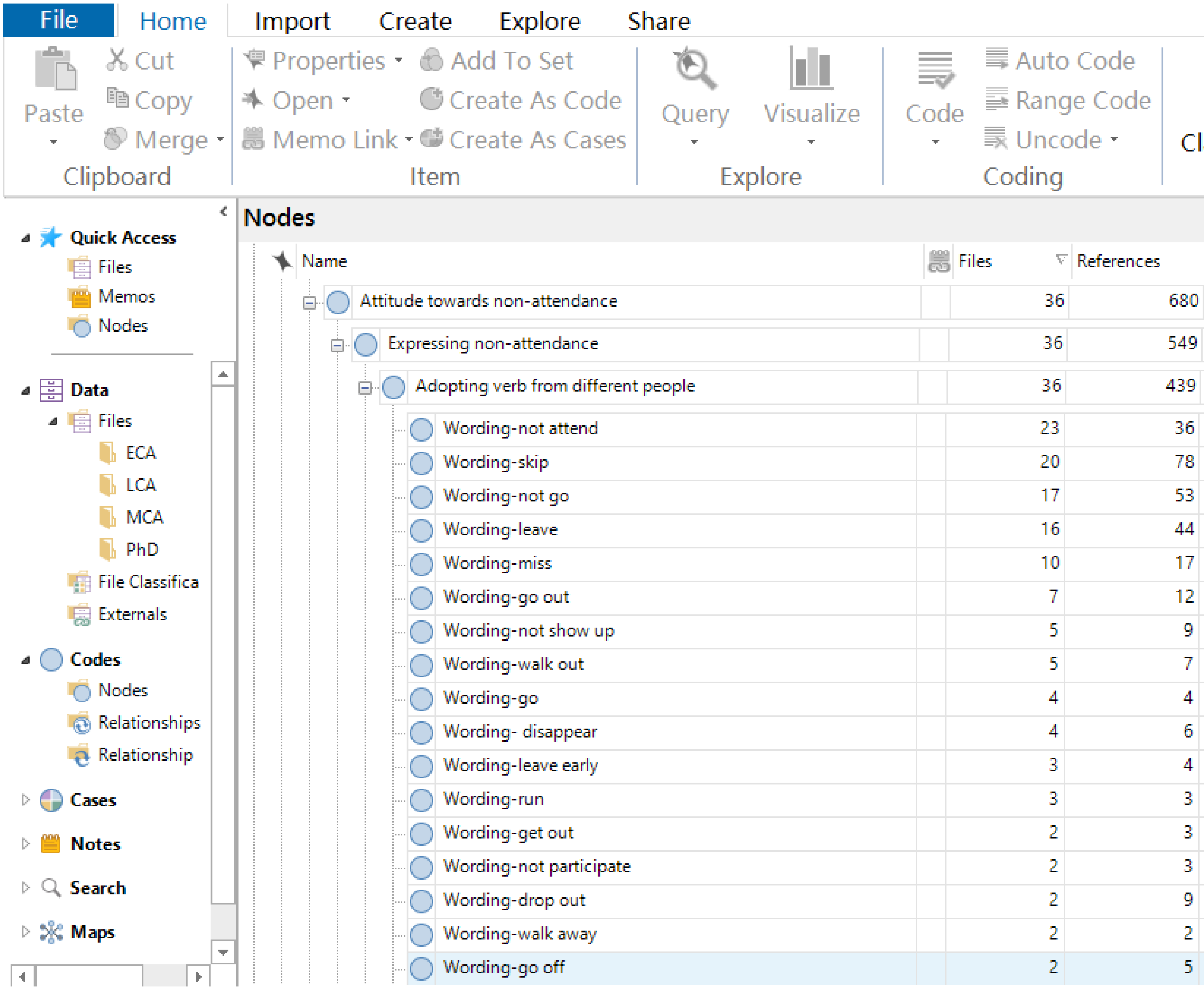
Having less attendees in last session 5 11
Having a break 3 3
Having trouble to wake up early 3 3
Depending on convenience 2 4
Feel ignored 2 3
Feeling bad 1 1
Lasting too long 1 1
Lack of interest in topic 21 44
Having session irrelevant to research field 16 23
Having language barriers 1 3
Conference fatigue 13 22
Having jetleg 6 13
Competing priorities 10 17
Having work commitment 11 24
Preparing own presentation 5 8
Being influenced by others 9 15
Peers 8 13
Travel partners-family 2 2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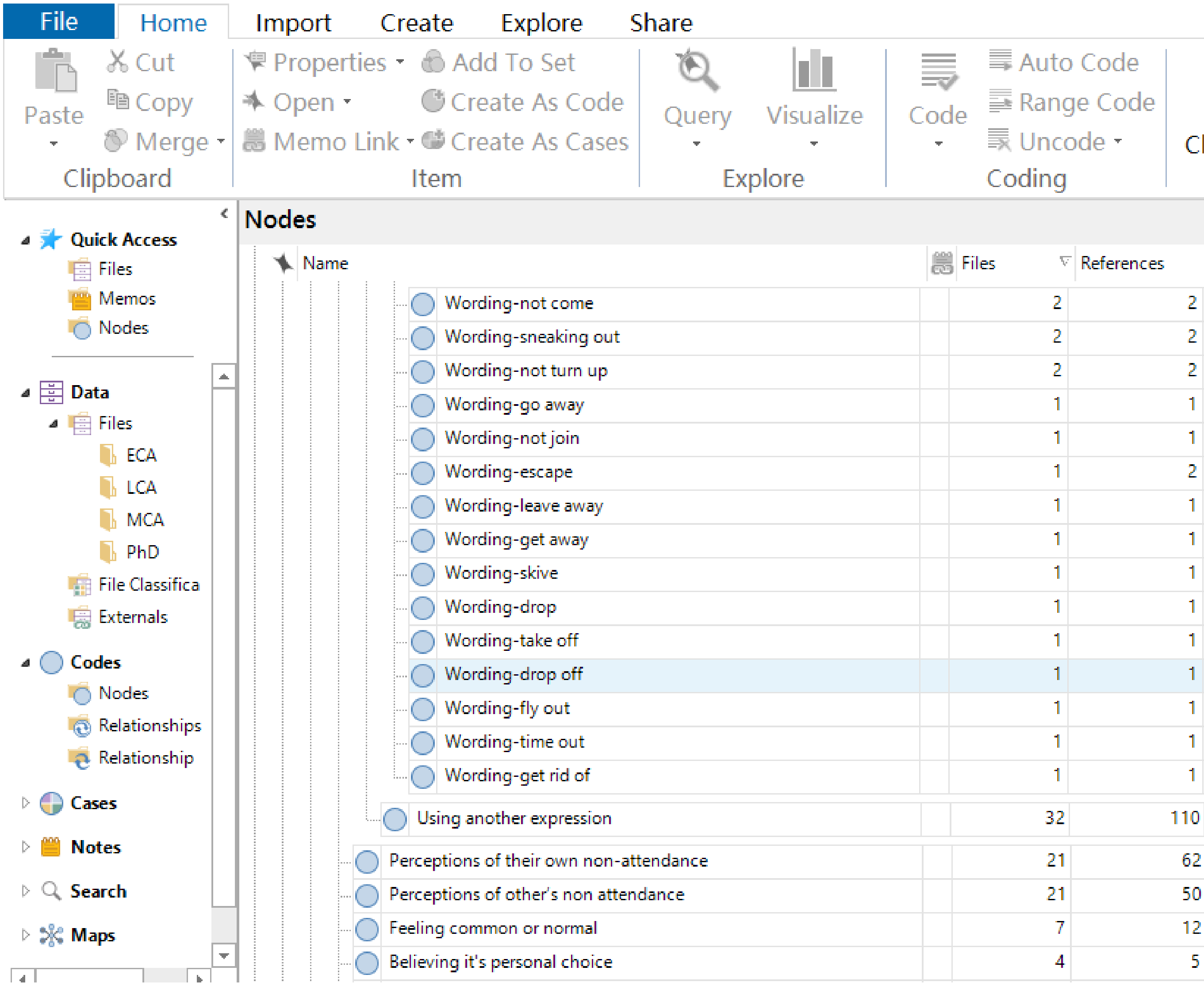
Attitude towards non-attendance 36 680
Expressing non-attendance 36 549
Adopting verb from different people 36 439
Wording-not attend 23 36
Wording-skip 20 78
Wording-not go 17 53
Wording-leave 16 44
Wording-miss 10 17
Wording-go out 7 12
Wording-not show up 5 9
Wording-walk out 5 7
Wording-go 4 4
Wording- disappear 4 6
Wording-leave early 3 4
Wording-run 3 3
Wording-get out 2 3
Wording-not participate 2 3
Wording-drop out 2 9
Wording-walk away 2 2
Wording-go off 2 5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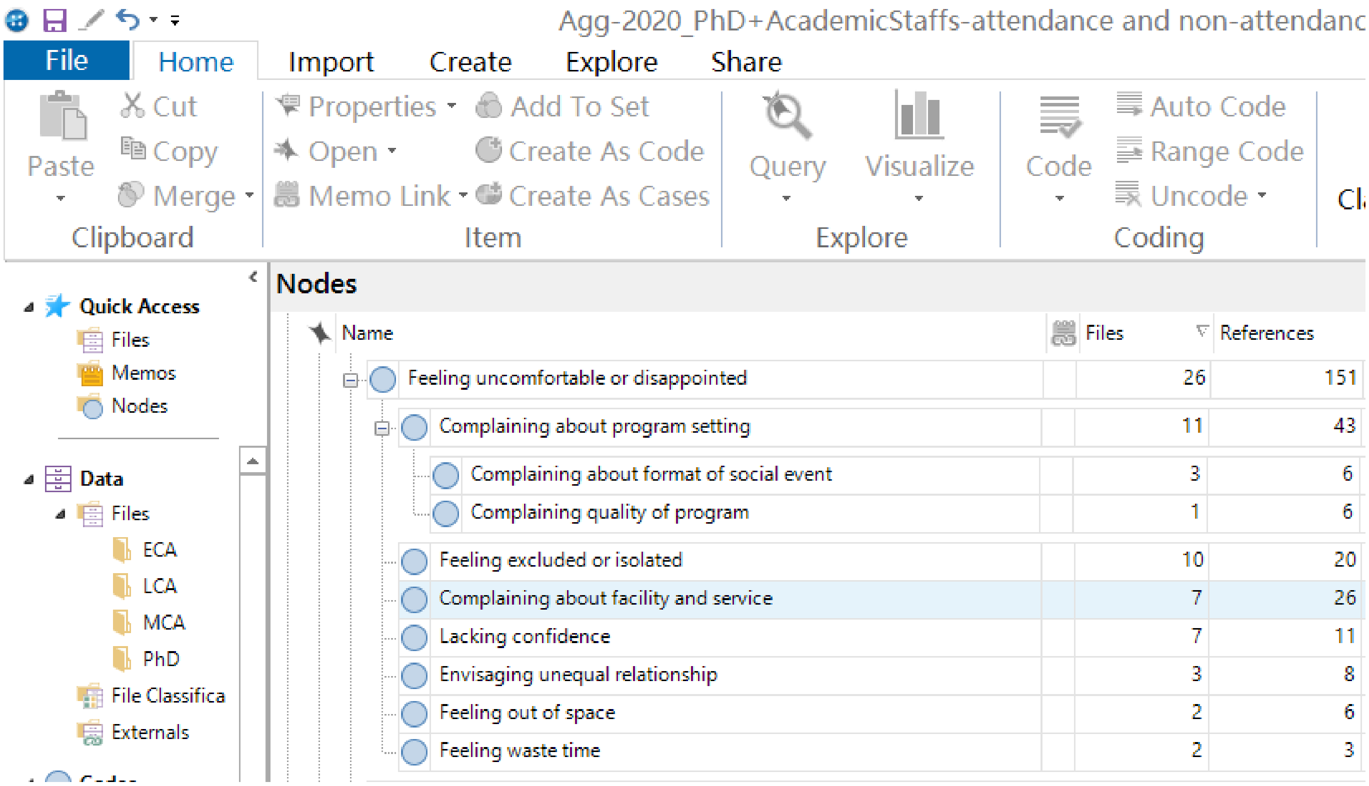
Wording-not come 2 2
Wording-sneaking out 2 2
Wording-not turn up 2 2
Wording-go away 1 1
Wording-not join 1 1
Wording-escape 1 2
Wording-leave away 1 1
Wording-get away 1 1
Wording-skive 1 1
Wording-drop 1 1
Wording-take off 1 1
Wording-drop off 1 1
Wording-fly out 1 1
Wording-time out 1 1
Wording-get rid of 1 1
Using another expression 32 110
Perceptions of their own non-attendance 21 62
Perceptions of other's non attendance 21 50
Feeling common or normal 7 12
Believing it's personal choice 4 5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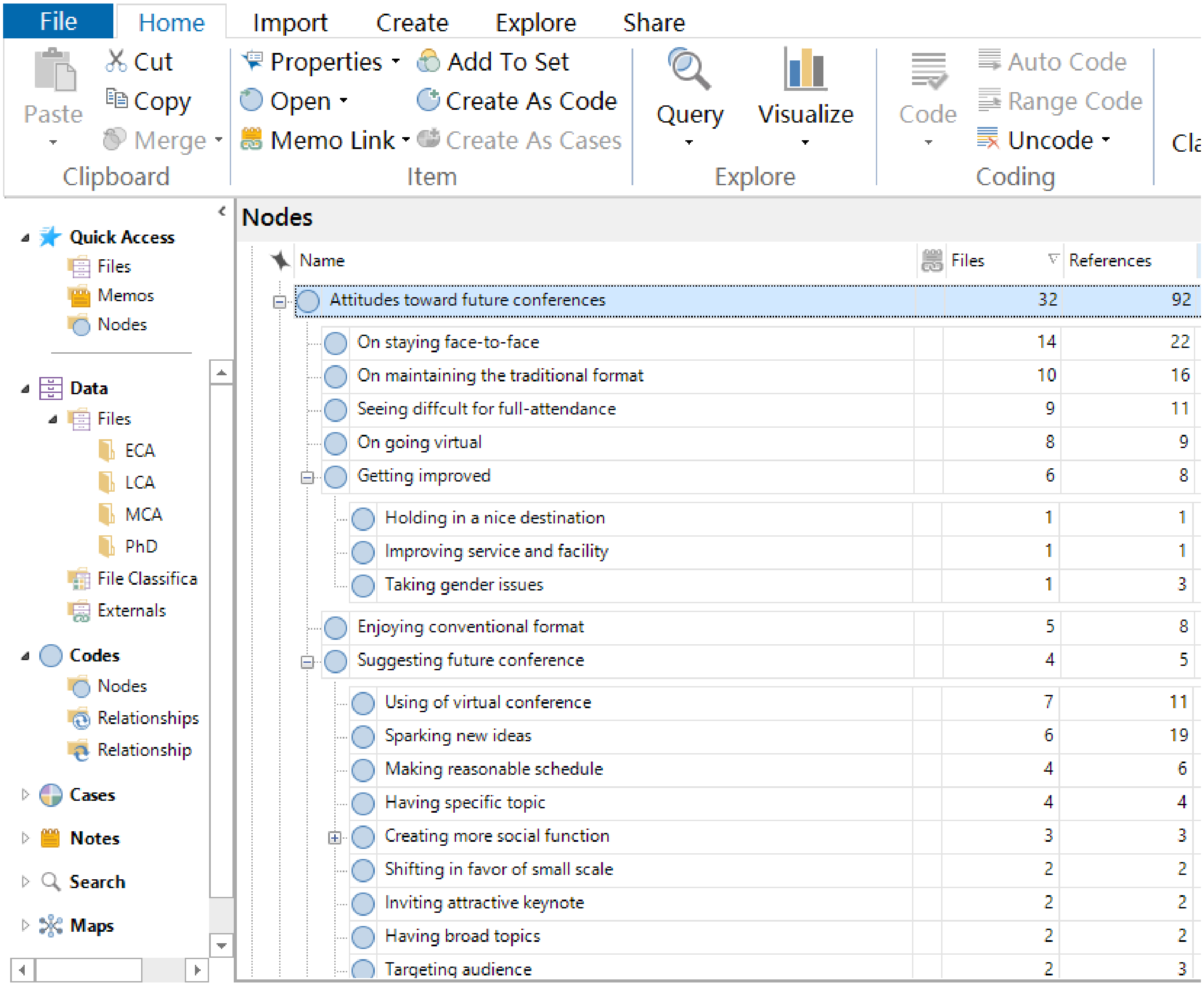
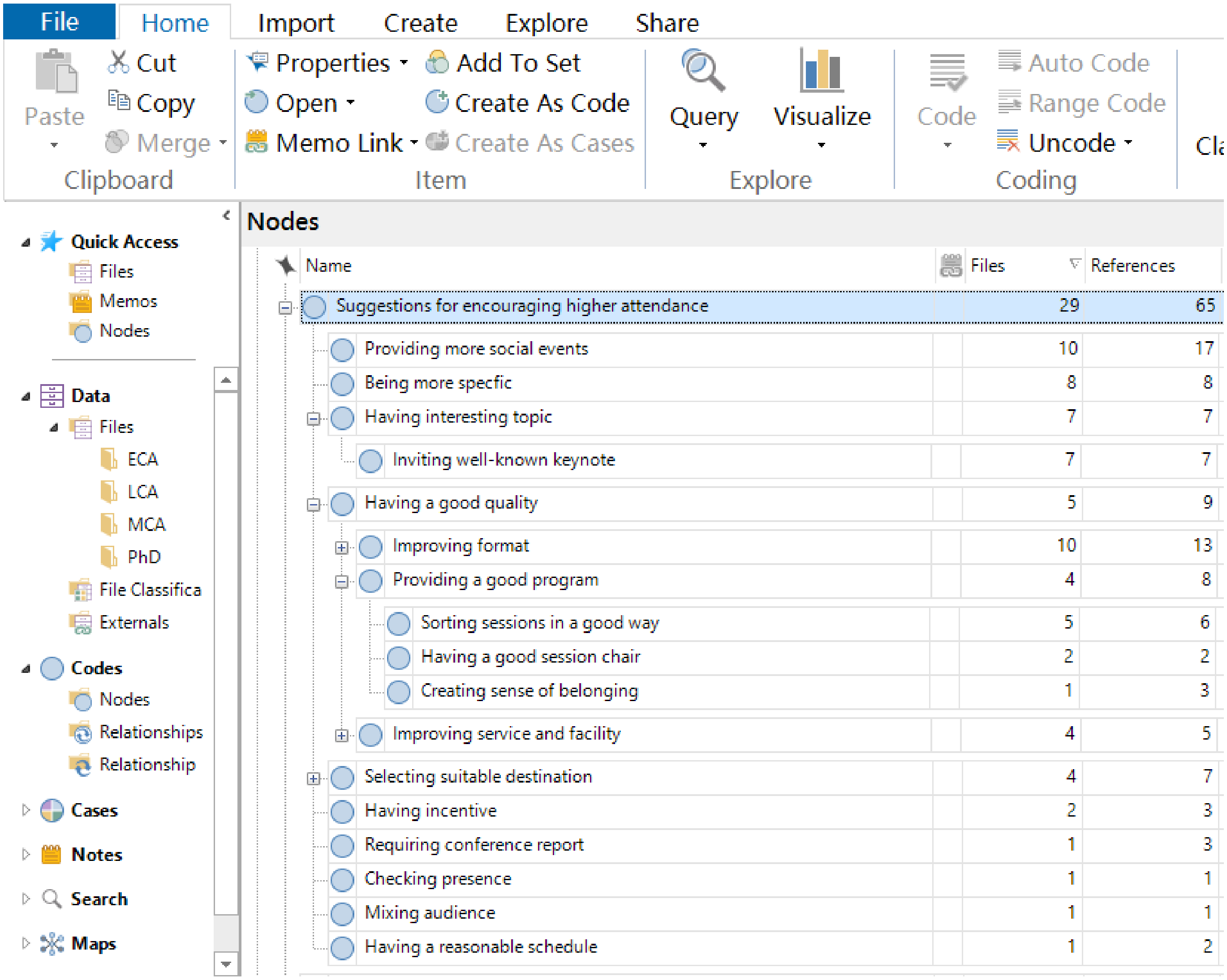
Feeling uncomfortable or disappointed 26 151
Complaining about program setting 11 43
Complaining about format of social event 3 6
Complaining quality of program 1 6
Feeling excluded or isolated 10 20
Complaining about facility and service 7 26
Lacking confidence 7 11
Envisaging unequal relationship 3 8
Feeling out of space 2 6
Feeling waste time 2 3

Stage 3: Reflections post-conference



Name	Files	References
Attitudes toward future conferences	32	92
On staying face-to-face	14	22
On maintaining the traditional format	10	16
Seeing diffcult for full-attendance	9	11
On going virtual	8	9
Getting improved	6	8
Holding in a nice destination	1	1
Improving service and facility	1	1
Taking gender issues	1	3
Enjoying conventional format	5	8
Suggesting future conference	4	5
Using of virtual conference	7	11
Sparking new ideas	6	19
Making reasonable schedule	4	6
Having specific topic	4	4
Creating more social function	3	3
Shifting in favor of small scale	2	2
Inviting attractive keynote	2	2
Having broad topics	2	2
Targeting audience	2	3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Suggestions for encouraging higher attendance 29 65
Providing more social events 10 17
Being more specfic 8 8
Having interesting topic 7 7
Inviting well-known keynote 7 7
Having a good quality 5 9
Improving format 10 13
Providing a good program 4 8
Sorting sessions in a good way 5 6
Having a good session chair 2 2
Creating sense of belonging 1 3
Improving service and facility 4 5
Selecting suitable destination 4 7
Having incentive 2 3
Requiring conference report 1 3
Checking presence 1 1
Mixing audience 1 1
Having a reasonable schedule 1 2