The global multi-hub academic conference: Both sustainable and inclusive

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Regular single-location global conferences exclude colleagues who cannot afford registration, travel, and accommodation. They also rely on carbon-intensive aviation. Both aspects can be seen as colonialist or even racist: visible minorities are effectively excluded, and the global South is more climate-vulnerable (cf. Parncutt & Seither-Preisler, 2019).

A multi-hub conference can solve both problems simultaneously. Many academic disciplines have regular regional conferences on different continents. They could be held simultaneously and electronically networked. A mixture of face-to-face communication and virtual interaction radically improves both sustainability and inclusion. An example was the 2018 International Conference on Music Perception and Cognition (ICMPC) held in Argentina, Australia, Austria, and Canada (Parncutt et al., 2019). In 2022, a multi-hub climate science conference was held in China, UK, and USA (Kremser et al., 2024).

Real-time interaction can be maximized by placing three hubs exactly eight hours apart, with other hubs close to them in time (Parncutt et al., 2021). To maximize connectivity, the working day at each hub is divided into two 4-hour sessions separated a 4-hour siesta. Speakers and remote audiences communicate using widely available equipment: laptops with inbuilt camera and microphone, conferencing software, data projector, loudspeakers. With movable seating, any audience member can approach the stage during Q&A. A conference might have 1000 active participants at 7 hubs (e.g., North & South America, Europe, Africa, India, East Asia, Australia). The number of hubs is unlimited, and if colleagues are prepared to shift their normal working day forwards or backwards for a few hours over a few days, a hub can be placed anywhere.

In this talk, I will compare the pros and cons of different conference formats, and explain in detail how a multi-hub conference can be organized.

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