

To present or to be present? Rethinking the value of the academic conference

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Abstract

Academic conferences have become predictable and largely transactional, organised around paper presentations, proceeding publications, and performance metrics. This viewpoint argues for a rethinking of this value proposition. Drawing on Service-Dominant Logic and Value Co-Creation Theory, we reframe the academic conference not as a service that delegates consume but as a co-creative ecosystem they collectively produce. We propose that the value of a conference lies in the dialogue, relationships, and shared meaning-making that unfold across and beyond it, and that conference participants, including early career researchers, postgraduate students, academics, practitioners, and organisers alike, are active co-creators of that value rather than passive recipients of it. To illustrate what co-creative design looks like in practice, we use the International Conference on Responsible Tourism and Hospitality (ICRTH) as a case vignette, reflecting on it through the four mechanisms that underlie co-creation: dialogue, positioning, voice, and agency. We conclude this viewpoint by considering what this reframing means for participants, organisers, and institutions, with particular attention to its relevance in Asian business and higher education contexts.

Keywords: Academic conferences, Value co-creation, Service-dominant logic, International Conference on Responsible Tourism and Hospitality.

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Introduction

For graduate students, early career researchers, and even seasoned academicians, conferences have become largely predictable and obligatory. The ritual is familiar: submit an abstract, wait for acceptance, travel to the venue, present slides, collect a certificate, and return home with multiple business cards and high hopes of securing a publication. Shaped by performance metrics, peer pressure, and publication pipelines, the academic conference today has become more of a formal checkpoint than a space for genuine discovery.

Yet, it is not merely presenting at a conference that leaves the deepest imprint on our professional identities and academic trajectories. The most meaningful memories are rarely scheduled in itineraries, but made through conversation, shared reflection, community engagement, and relational continuity that go beyond the linear presenter–listener transaction.

This viewpoint begins from that lived reality. Drawing on Service-Dominant Logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2016) and Value Co-Creation Theory (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004), we propose reframing academic conferences from transactional events into co-creative service ecosystems. In this view, conference participants are not passive consumers of content but active co-creators of relationships, meaning, and impact. This shift advocates a fundamentally different understanding of where the value of a conference lies and who is responsible for producing it. In consumer research, co-creation is well established as a process through which stakeholders move beyond passive consumption to become collaborative architects of value (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2016). Applying this lens to the conference context raises a relevant question: how can academic conferences incorporate co-creative participation for sustained value?

To exemplify the concept of co-creative conference design, we draw on the International Conference on Responsible Tourism and Hospitality (ICRTH) as an illustrative case. Our aim is not to idealise a single event, but to use it as conceptual basis for a broader argument: conferences designed around dialogue, agency, community voice, and relational continuity produce unique value that presentation-centric, publication-driven formats do not. This reframing carries particular significance for early career researchers, postgraduate students, academics, industry partners, and organising stakeholders who co-produce academic conference experiences.

Conceptualising the Academic Conference

The traditional understanding of academic conferences centres on the presentation of papers and the fulfilment of key performance indicators. This view positions conference delegates as consumers whose primary function is reception rather than contribution, thus limiting the value that conferences generate informally.

Henderson (2015) offered an important argument against this narrow perspective, conceptualising academic conferences as “globalised, marketised, and technologised” sites that exceed purely rational and instrumental interpretations. Her analysis

highlights the social, affective, and relational processes in conference participation that actively mould academic identity and long-term collaboration. Learning and professional development at conferences emerge not only through formal presentations but through informal encounters, embodied interactions, and shared emotional experiences, making conferences particularly conducive spaces for value creation (Henderson, 2015).

Burford and Henderson (2023) extended this argument by framing conferences as critical professional learning environments and complex social spaces where community formation and identity development are more powerful and durable outcomes than formal knowledge exchange. Etzion et al. (2022), reflecting on the post-COVID conference landscape, likewise stated that conferences should be grounded in inclusion, community, and shared purpose rather than built around publication pipelines and prestige.

The aforementioned scholars share our stance that conferences are lived learning ecosystems rather than transactional academic marketplaces. However, Cavusoglu et al.'s (2023) conjoint analysis of conference attendance decisions found that delegates continue to be driven primarily by transactional considerations: the total cost of attendance, organiser reputation, publication opportunities, and conference size. These findings reveal the gap between what conferences currently offer and what participants genuinely need. When numbers dominate attendance decisions, conferences become deliverable products that delegates consume rather than valuable experiences they co-create. Closing this gap requires a fundamental reorientation of how conferences design their value proposition.

Theorising the Value of Academic Conferences

This viewpoint makes the case for reimagining academic conferences as co-creative ecosystems. At its core, this is a design argument: the value a conference generates is shaped by the choices its organisers make about space, time, programme, and purpose. Accordingly, our reframing of academic conferences as co-creative ecosystems is based on the converging theoretical frameworks of Service-Dominant Logic and Value Co-Creation Theory.

Service-Dominant Logic, developed by Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2016), holds that value is co-created through the active integration of resources by multiple actors, rather than simply produced by one actor and consumed by another. The customer is not a passive end-point in a supply chain but a resource who brings knowledge, skills, relationships, and social context to every service interaction. Critically, Vargo and Lusch (2016) extended this logic to the concept of service ecosystems, which they defined as self-adjusting networks of actors connected by service exchanges. In such ecosystems, value is not delivered; it emerges relationally through the ongoing interaction of all participants.

This concept translates directly to the academic conference. When a conference is seen as a service ecosystem rather than a content delivery platform, each participant becomes a resource whose engagement is not supplementary but central. A conference produces value not through the sum of its presentations but through the interactions,

relationships, and shared meaning-making that unfold across and beyond its programme. The key shift here is from value-in-exchange, which is fixed and transactional, to value-in-use, which is dynamic and co-constructed. Rather than simply receiving the programme they paid for, delegates create value by engaging with the people, ideas, and spaces around them.

Value Co-Creation Theory offers a complementary lens. Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004) DART framework identifies dialogue, access, risk assessment, and transparency as the building blocks of genuine co-creation, arguing that value emerges not from products or services in isolation but from the quality of interactions between consumers and the ecosystems they inhabit. This repositioning of the consumer as a collaborative architect of value aligns fully with our view of conference participation. In the academic conference setting, *dialogue* means genuine two-way exchange, not brief Q&As at the end of presentations; *access* calls for the knowledge and relational resources of the conference to be open to all participants, not concentrated around keynotes and senior scholars; *risk assessment* means participants have genuine agency over the conference experience based on complete information about risks and benefits; and *transparency* denotes that academic uncertainty and incomplete knowledge are legitimate conversations rather than hidden weaknesses. These are not abstract ideals but designable features that conferences can embed to generate richer, more valuable experiences.

The theoretical connection between co-creation and academic value has already been made in the higher education context. Dollinger et al. (2018) developed a model where students are positioned as active co-creators who contribute feedback, intellectual resources, and social capital, thereby generating value that traditional provider–consumer models cannot. More recently, Omland et al.'s (2025) systematic review of 222 co-creation studies in higher education identified dialogue, positioning, voice, and agency as the core mechanisms driving co-creation. *Dialogue* facilitates mutual meaning-making; *positioning* reshapes hierarchical roles so that participants are not merely recipients of expertise; *voice* lets participants influence shared norms; and *agency* allows participants to act as contributors rather than spectators. Their review offers an important takeaway: co-creation is not a single activity but a sustained ecology of relational conditions that must be deliberately cultivated.

Importantly, Verbeke (2015), drawing on his experience designing more than 15 academic conferences, showed that collaborative small-group work, collective plenary dialogue, extended interaction time, and generous peer feedback all enhance knowledge consolidation among participants. His central argument, that conferences should be designed to stimulate collective knowledge construction rather than merely host presentations, corresponds directly with our theoretical premise: conference design shapes the conditions under which value can be co-created.

Taken together, these theoretical foundations and empirical evidence offer a robust precedent for applying co-creation frameworks to structured academic settings like conferences. This editorial, therefore, proposes the academic conference as a co-creative service ecosystem, in which participants are not passive consumers but active resource integrators whose presence and participation are central to a conference's value. Here, conference participants play a threefold role: as consumers of the academic event-as-service, as producers of its intellectual content, and as architects of its social

and professional outcomes.

Lessons from ICRTTH

This section draws on our collective experiences of ICRTTH, as a practice-based reflective vignette rather than a formal case study. It is intended to illustrate co-creation principles rather than to demonstrate them empirically. We acknowledge the potential partiality of insider reflection, and we present these observations in the spirit of scholarly transparency.

ICRTTH was conceived as a conference about responsible tourism, aspiring to be a space where tourism researchers, practitioners, educators, and community members can convene beyond traditional academic–industry hierarchies. What emerged across successive editions was, in retrospect, a live experiment in co-creative conference design. We structure our reflections on these design choices around the four co-creation mechanisms identified by Omland et al. (2025) for higher education: dialogue, positioning, voice, and agency.

Dialogue

ICRTTH's most deliberate departure from convention is building intentional space for dialogue. Although presentations remain important, they are rarely the end point. The conference has consistently sought to blur the boundary between global academic discourse and local community knowledge. Consequently, sessions evolve into honest conversations about failures, funding difficulties, and ethical dilemmas in community research. Collective reflection sessions held after field visits or community encounters are also integral to the programme, with participants being invited to share what had unsettled them and what had challenged an assumption. Many describe leaving with new ways of thinking rather than just new citations, constituting a unique form of value. Thus, dialogues are among the most generative moments of ICRTTH, producing the mutual meaning-making that lies at the core of genuine co-creation.

Positioning

A second design choice concerns how participants are positioned relative to one another. Community visits, school engagements, and local dialogues are not presented just as optional excursions, but as core learning spaces in which ICRTTH delegates are expected to engage. These encounters reframe where expertise resides: community partners are knowledge holders, not research subjects. Many participants have reflected on how interacting directly with teachers, students, and community members has shifted their understanding of what responsible tourism looks like in practice. For early career researchers, in particular, seeing their work connected to real people rather than only to reviewers and journals is a novel experience. Thus, ICRTTH flattens the hierarchies that typically govern who is an expert. This repositioning matters because, as Omland et al. (2025) argue, co-creation depends on dismantling the assumption that expertise flows in one direction. By treating local practitioners, students, and scholars as differently knowledgeable rather than hierarchically ranked, ICRTTH facilitates genuine exchange across these boundaries.

Voice

Positioning creates the conditions for voice: the capacity of participants to shape the conference's shared practices and norms. Much of this is attributed to the visibility given to those who sustain a conference but are rarely heard. Networking at ICRTTH is never limited to registered delegates; local educators, tourism practitioners, and community leaders also play active roles in the conference. Small gestures, such as naming community members, openly recognising the organising labour, and inviting local practitioners to co-present rather than remain as case studies, highlight the voices that matter and leave stronger impressions on delegates. By making diverse local perspectives visible and valued, ICRTTH shows that academic dialogue can be globally relevant and locally grounded at once. This reflects the Service-Dominant Logic insight that value in a service ecosystem is co-created by all actors, not only the most visible ones like keynote speakers (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). From the value co-creation perspective, this also mirrors the principle of access: ensuring that the knowledge and relational resources of the conference are available to all participants, not concentrated at the top of the academic hierarchy (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004).

Agency

While voice is about being heard, agency is about being able to act. ICRTTH seeks to give participants genuine influence over the conference rather than limiting them to the audience role. This comes not from novelty formats but from a relational intention that runs through the whole event, from how sessions are facilitated to how the closing ceremony acknowledges contributions beyond formal presentations. The emphasis is on enabling participants to act as contributors rather than spectators, namely by empowering them to shape discussions, initiate connections, and take ownership of parts of the experience. This creates a richer and more inclusive sense of belonging, particularly for participants who often feel peripheral in large conferences dominated by established scholars. Such accountability and honesty, even when it comes to accounts of failure or gaps in knowledge, mirrors Verbeke's (2015) argument that experiential, hands-on elements are powerful catalysts for collective knowledge construction. Agency, in this sense, is what turns a well-designed conference into a genuinely co-created one.

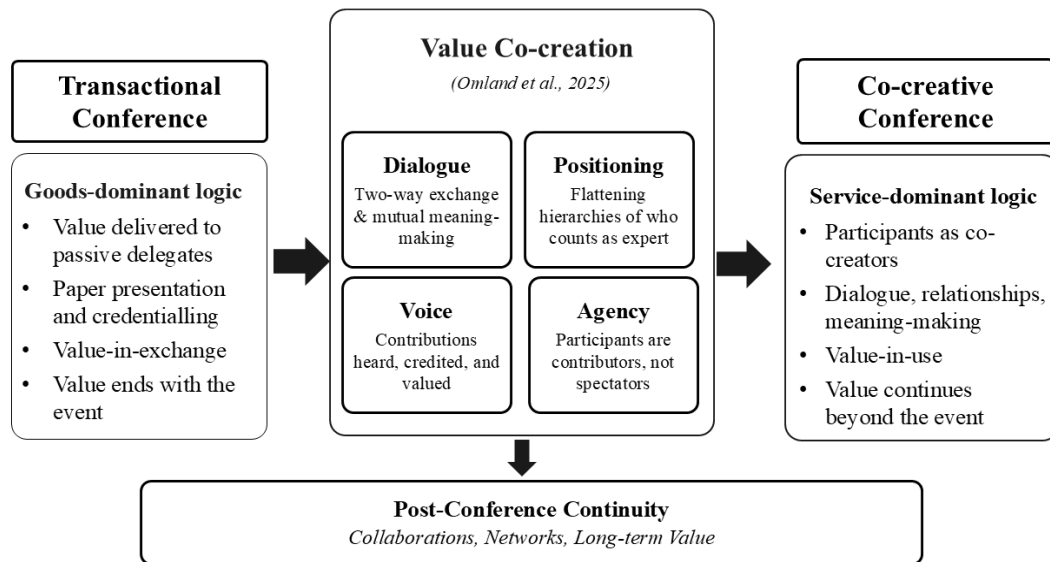
The Outcome of Co-Creation: Post-event Continuity

The clearest evidence that these four mechanisms contribute to ICRTTH's co-created value is what happens after the closing ceremony. Working groups, joint projects, grant discussions, student exchanges, and follow-up publications have become a reliable pattern across the years. These collaborations are not engineered, but are organically produced from a conference built around dialogue, equitable positioning, voice, and agency. In Service-Dominant Logic terms, this is value-in-use extending well beyond the event itself, as participants carry the relationships and ideas formed at ICRTTH into their ongoing work. For doctoral students and early career researchers building their research networks, this may be the most significant value the conference creates. Designing for that continuity, rather than treating it as a happy coincidence, is one of the practical challenges within the co-creation approach.

Based on this vignette, Figure 1 presents our model of the academic conference as a co-

creative ecosystem. Notably, it illustrates how the four co-creation mechanisms identified by Omland et al. (2025) transform a transactional, goods-dominant event into a service-dominant ecosystem in which participants co-produce value that extends beyond the conference itself.

Figure 1: The academic conference as a co-creative ecosystem



Implications for Conference Stakeholders

The ICRTTH example shows that co-creative conference design is not a single intervention but a sustained and consistent process that signals to participants whether they are being invited to contribute or merely to attend. Translating this orientation into practice requires looking at the conference stakeholder groups whose roles must evolve: participants, organisers, academic institutions, and the local businesses and communities involved in the conference economy.

Conference Participants

The most immediate implication for early career researchers, postgraduate students, and emerging practitioners is a reframing of how they approach the conference as a consumer experience. The dominant script — submit, attend, present, collect certificate, return home — treats the conference as a service to be consumed. Disrupting this norm requires not only awareness, but also intentional preparation, active presence, and a willingness to invest beyond the formal programme.

Before the event, participants should not only peruse which keynote speakers they will be hearing from; they should also engage with others' work in advance, propose collaborative or interdisciplinary sessions, and identify the community partners or practitioners they want to meet. During the conference, the relational value of informal conversations, shared meals, and post-session discussions is not supplementary to the formal programme. Rather, it is where the most significant learning and durable

connections form. After the event, the question is not “did I get a publication/certificate?” but “what continues?”, whether that means a working group, a joint project, a mentoring relationship, or a sustained correspondence. These small shifts reflect the co-creation principle that value-in-use is generated through active participation: those who approach conferences as co-creators rather than consumers generate more value from them, both for themselves and for others (Vargo and Lusch, 2016).

Conference Organisers

The design implications are the most concrete. The four mechanisms Omland et al. (2025) put forth offer organisers a practical structure. *Dialogue* means building genuine two-way exchange into the programme itself, not as a courtesy at the end of presentations but as the primary mode of engagement. Examples include collective reflection sessions, small-group workshops, or panels where respondents are given as much time as presenters. *Positioning* entails designing the conference so that expertise is not assumed to flow in one direction, deliberately creating spaces where early career researchers, practitioners, and community partners meet as differently knowledgeable equals rather than by institutional rank. This matters most for the local communities that conferences often treat as field-visit backdrops or research subjects; positioning them as knowledge holders is what distinguishes co-creation from extraction. *Voice* involves ensuring that those who sustain the event are heard and credited, from naming community contributors to inviting local practitioners to co-present rather than feature as case studies. *Agency* calls for giving participants real influence over the experience through co-designed sessions, participant-led discussions, open programme slots, and feedback that demonstrably shapes future editions. As Omland et al. (2025) argue, agency is not a soft motivational add-on; it is a structural condition for co-creation to function at all.

Conference design considerations carry particular weight in Asia, where academic conferences are proliferating rapidly. The region hosts a fast-growing share of the world’s academic conferences, driven by the massification of higher education, national research-performance agendas, and universities’ ambition to raise their international visibility. Yet the model imported into this growth is largely Western and goods-dominant: a transactional format built around paper presentations, publication output, and ranking-driven reputation. For Asian institutions and the businesses that sustain the regional conference economy, including venues, hospitality providers, tourism operators, and event organisers, this is both a risk and an opportunity.

The risk is commoditisation: as conference numbers multiply across Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Jakarta, Singapore, and beyond, events that compete only on cost, venue prestige, and indexed-proceedings become substitutable and price-sensitive. A conference that markets only transactional value is easily undercut by the next lower-priced event making identical promises. The opportunity lies in differentiation through co-creation, which is harder to replicate yet aligns naturally with the relational orientation of many Asian business cultures. The long-term networks, reciprocity, and community obligation that are central to commercial life across the region are precisely what a co-creative conference activates. Indeed, Asian organisers are well positioned to place relationship-building at the centre. ICRTTH, hosted in the region and built around community engagement and the visible inclusion of non-academic stakeholders,

shows how an Asian-based event can turn these relational strengths into a distinctive value proposition.

Academic Institutions

The institutional implications are the most practically challenging, because they require a vast shift in how conference participation is measured. A conference may produce no publications but enable three early career researchers to form a meaningful collaboration; introduce a doctoral student to a future supervisor; or connect a practitioner to scholars whose work informs their practice. In each of these cases, the conference has generated substantial academic and social value, but none will appear in a performance report. Recognising relational, developmental, and community outcomes alongside output metrics is therefore a more accurate account of what conferences actually do for the people who attend. Institutions should develop ways to capture this fuller range of value, and resist evaluating conference participation solely through publications produced and presentations delivered.

Business schools, which train the region's future managers and compete for international accreditation, have a particular stake: modelling co-creation in their own scholarly events offers both a pedagogical and a reputational dividend. In the Asian context where relationships, community, and long-term reciprocity are foundational to commercial life, the co-creative conference is not merely a better academic event; it is a more culturally congruent and strategically sustainable one.

Local Businesses and Communities

Though relatively removed from core conference activities, local businesses and communities can also take practical inspiration from our co-creative conference model. Service providers for conferences have a bigger role to play than supplying rooms and catering food. As local community members, they can co-design location-based experiential programmes, such as field visits, community engagement, and cultural immersion activities. Such initiatives may become integral to the academic value of the event rather than peripheral to it, deepening the link between conferences and local communities while advancing the agenda to bridge knowledge with practice. Done well, this turns local communities from a resource the conference draws on into a stakeholder that shares its value. Thus, in addition to earning an income from the conference, locals also receive recognition, reciprocal learning, and a say in how their knowledge is represented. This is the responsible agenda that should be applied to the conference economy.

Conclusion

Academic conferences will not transform themselves. The dominant format of sequential presentations, passive audiences, credential collection, and swift dispersal is deeply institutionalised, reinforced by funding criteria, performance metrics, and the career pressures that drive researchers to attend in the first place. Rebranding the conference is not, therefore, a matter of scheduling more networking breaks. It requires a fundamental shift in how organisers, participants, and institutions understand what conferences are for and who is responsible for the value they produce.

This viewpoint has argued for that shift through the service-dominant and value co-creation lens. Drawing on Vargo and Lusch's (2016) service ecosystems and Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004) co-creative interaction, we have proposed that conferences are best understood not as events that deliver value to passive delegates, but as ecosystems in which all participants (i.e., early career researchers, senior scholars, practitioners, community members, and organisers) integrate their resources, relationships, and knowledge to create value that no single actor could produce alone. The conference, in this case, is not a service that participants consume; it is an ecosystem they inhabit, shape, and partially constitute. We challenge how conference value is currently measured and rewarded, with the assertion that real value is not captured by performance indicators. Closing that gap is part of what this viewpoint has set out to do.

Our reflections on ICRTTH are offered not as a model to be replicated but as evidence that co-creative design is achievable in practice. The choices that have made ICRTTH different are not cost-intensive or technically complex; they reflect a willingness to prioritise dialogue, relationship-building, and open-ended learning over linear delivery and polished output. Any conference organiser can embed these features, with any budget, in any discipline.

For participants, we invite you to approach each conference by asking not only “what will I present?” and “who will I meet?” but “what will I contribute?” and “what will continue after we all go home?” This mindset shifts the thought process from consumption to co-creation, with people, relationships, and shared purpose placed at the centre. The question, in the end, is not whether we present, but whether we are present — and the conferences that understand the difference are the ones that have true value.

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