

## Academic tourism from an equity theory perspective

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### Abstract

Academic tourism has many definitions, mostly framed positively. However, when academics attend conferences or courses at foreign destinations, they are often accused of opportunism, implying that tourism and leisure take preference to academic goals. In this article the benefits associated with a visit to an academic institution in a foreign country are discussed. The article contrasts the leisure and monetary position of an academic attending a short course abroad versus someone who does not have the opportunity to travel. The results indicate that some leisure is afforded to those attending conferences, though this cannot be viewed in absolute terms. With regard to monetary benefits, no advantages are formally afforded to the academic who wants to engage in tourism activities while visiting foreign countries. Sceptics of academics travelling abroad and those who accuse them of opportunism are encouraged to quantify their arguments and not to blindly criticise those who travel for academic purposes.

**Keywords:** Academic tourism, academic mobility, equity theory



Source: <http://misconceptions.us/images/academia.jpg>

## Introduction

Academic mobility can be considered as a type of tourism, since it meets the parameters used for this purpose by international organisations related to the field of tourism (Roget, López, and Pawlowska, 2013). It can be defined as a distinct type of tourism which entails residing at higher education institutions, away from the participants' usual place of residence, for a period of less than one year, with the main objective to complete degree-level studies (Rodríguez, Martínez-Roget, and Pawlowska, 2013; Roget et al., 2013) or to attend courses (Rodríguez et al., 2013). These types of endeavours occur on a large scale, and the ERASMUS (European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) initiative is the major example in Europe. The United States also has a long tradition of sending students abroad (Hoffa, 2007).

Academic tourism, as defined above, has objectives additional to the educational experience (Roget et al., 2013). Spending time in a foreign place provides students with the opportunity to learn languages, to experience the local culture and customs, as well as to immerse themselves in that specific society. Exposure to new concepts and the exchange of ideas contribute to the educational experience of the student. This aspect plays an important role in greater international understanding (Breen, 2012; Roget et al., 2013). It can be considered to be an add-on to formal learning. However, some, such as the Gates Institute (2015: no page), "take students and professionals abroad for a hands-on learning experience in specific subjects like International Operations, Business Management, (and) International Business". The visits themselves constitute the primary source of learning and are capital in the learning process. Many business schools, targeting mature students, arrange such visits as part of their formal academic offering. Examples of these schools are the Gordon Institute for Business Studies (GIBS, 2015), the

University of the Witwatersrand Business School (Wits, 2015) and the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University Business School (NMMU, 2015). It is suggested that "travel with an academic purpose has become a necessity for students to be able to prepare themselves for wider challenges ahead" (Jenkins, 2010: 7).

Aforementioned tourism is a matter of interest to many parties, including the universities which endorse such programmes, but also to economists, who are interested in how much tourism contributes to local economies (Rodríguez et al., 2013; Roget et al., 2013). The number of international students in Australia, for example, was 271 494 in 2014, compared to the 905 307 domestic students (Australian Government Department of Education and Training 2015a). This figure represents 23.1 per cent of the total student population. It therefore has a significant effect on the economy of Australia, amounting to the equivalent of 16 billion Australian Dollars in annual export earnings (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2015b).

The practice of studying abroad is in general seen as above board and endorsed by most in the university environment. This research report focuses on a different type of academic tourism, more ambiguous and frowned upon by several academics and administrators. Some within the academic community "intend(ed) to make academics that travel to conferences look opportunistic" (Ojong, 2013: 84). The emphasis in this paper is on the kind of academic tourism where academics (seemingly) misuse their stay at conferences or courses presented at foreign universities and utilise these opportunities as holiday time, dishonestly using university money to sponsor their time abroad, allowing tourism and leisure to take preference over academic goals.

There are numerous examples of this kind of criticism. This is particularly evident from

blog posts. In one of these Thomas S (Wellsphere, 2015: no page) paints a rather negative picture and makes the following pertinent comments on attending international conferences: "I'd rather participate in an academic discussion on my iPad at home or in a café than sitting in an ugly meeting room in an anonymous hotel somewhere in the middle of global nowhere ... Going to conferences more and more feels like a kind of ritualised masochism. You're time-lagged and sleep-deprived and are fed tasteless transfat-saturated cookies or small sandwiches with processed meat on soft white bread. Travelling is a waste of time, money and environmental resources: it drains your research grant for money that could have been used more productively, produces unnecessary tons of carbon dioxide, and helps transnational hotel chains increase their profit margins."

Cerdeira Bento however (2014:601) suggests that external factors "such as relevant aspects of the destination chosen and preferences related to travel" can also influence academics when they travel. Perry (2012: no page) also refers to the role of the attractiveness of conference locations: "Hold an academic conference in early March in an exotic location like Costa Rica, and professors will flock to those events, with all expenses paid for by their students and/or taxpayers". The results contribute "to rising tuition and the higher education bubble." Wampole (2015: no page) states that many scholars confess in private that attending a conference "is an easy way to see all of one's friends conveniently or to meet new colleagues."

The report that follows is seen as important in exposing some of the allegations – exposing one of higher education's "dirty little secrets" (Perry, 2015: no page). In general, there are few works on academic tourism and the topic has not been analysed in depth up to now (Roget et al., 2013).

## Literature review – Equity theory

John Stacey Adams (1963; 1965) is often credited as the father of equity theory; however the contribution of theories of attribution (Heider, 1958) and social comparison (Festinger, 1957) should not be ignored. Equity theory is based on the premise that people compare the ratio of their inputs-to-outputs with the ratio of inputs-to-outputs of their referent group, and that their behaviour is influenced by this comparison (Hollyforde and Whiddett, 2002). When they perceive the comparison as fair, they see the situation as one of equality, and experience consonance. However, if they perceive the equation to be unequal, they experience dissonance, and are motivated to move towards a situation of consonance.

Important in the comparison is how inputs and outputs are defined, as well as the matter of who is considered as the referent group (Hollyforde and Whiddett, 2002). Both of these determinations are subjective, however, most (not all) will agree that certain norms exist with regard to what is valuable, for example using time as an input variable and monetary rewards as an output variable. Considering the referent group, the situation is even more subjective, and may vary from people at work, friends and family, to visions of the self, in the past or in the future. "The person making the comparison decides who the referent groups are" (Hollyforde and Whiddett, 2002: 63-64).

In this research equity theory will be used to weigh the leisure outcomes of an academic attending a four-day course at a foreign university against the leisure outputs of an academic not attending the aforementioned four-day course. Also, the disposable money available to an academic attending and one not attending the course will be presented. It is foreseen that this should cast light on what could be seen as a deceitful practice.

The use of equity theory seems applicable here, as “tourism models have traditionally relied on input-output modelling” and such “empirical tools that are often applied in research about the economic effects of tourism ...” (Roget et al., 2013: 334).

**Method**

In this paper the experiences of the author, attending a four-day course at a university in the United States of America (USA), are presented. The author is a lecturer at a South African university. As such, attending the course could perhaps be seen as academic tourism. Based on equity theory, and focusing only on the leisure part of attending the conference, the following equations can be used:

$$\begin{array}{l}
 \text{Time available for leisure} \\
 \text{(attending the course)} \\
 \hline
 \text{Time available} \\
 \text{(attending the course)} \\
 \\
 \text{Money available for leisure} \\
 \text{(attending the course)}
 \end{array}
 =
 \begin{array}{l}
 \text{Time available for leisure} \\
 \text{(not attending the course)} \\
 \hline
 \text{Time available} \\
 \text{(not attending the course)} \\
 \\
 \text{Money available for leisure} \\
 \text{(not attending the course)}
 \end{array}$$

Imbalances in any of the equations will provide insight into the research question. The results should be interpreted with caution, as it is a single case based on the experiences of an individual academic.

**Results**

The course in question was presented at an American business school, with a four day duration, starting on a Tuesday and running through to the Friday. The academic left for the course on the Tuesday before the course started and only returned to his office on the Monday after having completed the course. The course was not presented at the port of entry into the USA, and additional air travel from the port of

entry to the host university was necessary. A simple calculation would reveal that the academic spent 12 days away from the office to attend a four-day course. Could this be interpreted as academic tourism?

Table 1 presents the time available for leisure for the academic attending the course, versus a hypothetical academic candidate who did not attend. The comparison is based on an assumption that the time at the disposal of an individual per day is approximately 13 hours, running from 6:30 to 19:30. Furthermore, the analysis is based on the assumption that an academic spends a daily average of 8 hours at work (7:00 to 15:00).

**Table 1:** Leisure time available: Attending a course versus not attending a course

Day	Attending the course	Not attending the course	Actual leisure hours
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Day	Attending the course	Not attending the course	Actual leisure hours
Pre-course	2 hours to apply for the course plus 2 hours to make travel arrangements – inset costs (anti-leisure <sup>a</sup> ) 5 hours for course preparation, i.e. reading case studies – inset costs (anti-leisure)		n/a
Day 1 Thursday	15:00 to 19:30 – Travel to airport, passport control, boarding procedures – inset costs (anti-leisure)  19:30 to next day in airplane – inset costs (anti-leisure)	6:30 to 7:00 – Leisure  15:00 to 19:30 – Leisure	0 hours for traveller / 5 hours
Day 2 Friday	6:30 to 9:00 – From plane to passport control, travel to hotel – inset cost (anti-leisure)  <u>9:00 to 19:30</u> – Leisure	6:30 to 7:00 – Leisure  15:00 to 19:30 – Leisure	10 ½ hours for traveller / 5 hours
Day 3 Saturday	<u>6:30 to 19:30</u> – Leisure	6:30 to 19:30 – Leisure	13 hours for traveller / 13 hours
Day 4 Sunday	<u>6:30 to 13:30</u> – Leisure  13:30 to 18:30 – Travel to airport, flight, travel to hotel – inset cost (anti-leisure)  18:30 to 19:30 – Leisure	6:30 to 19:30 – Leisure	8 hours for traveller / 13 hours
Day 5 Monday	<u>6:30 to 11:00</u> – Leisure  11:00 to 16:00 – Registration and lectures  16:00 to 17:00 – Leisure  17:00 to 19:30 – Structured course interaction	6:30 to 7:00 – Leisure  15:00 to 19:30 – Leisure	5 ½ hours for traveller / 5 hours
Day 6 Tuesday	6:30 to 9:00 – Leisure  09:00 to 16:00 – Lectures  16:00 to 17:00 – Leisure  17:00 to 19:30 – Structured course interaction	6:30 to 7:00 – Leisure  15:00 to 19:30 – Leisure	3 ½ hours for traveller / 5 hours
Day 7 Wednesday	6:30 to 9:00 – Leisure  09:00 to 16:00 – Lectures  <u>16:00 to 19:30</u> – Leisure	6:30 to 7:00 – Leisure  15:00 to 19:30 – Leisure	6 hours for traveller / 5 hours
Day 8 Thursday	6:30 to 9:00 – Leisure  09:00 to 16:00 – Lectures  16:00 to 17:00 – Leisure	6:30 to 7:00 – Leisure  15:00 to 19:30 – Leisure	3 ½ hours for traveller / 5 hours

Day	Attending the course	Not attending the course	Actual leisure hours
	17:00 to 19:30 – Structured course interaction		
Day 9 Friday	6:30 to 9:00 – Leisure 09:00 to 12:00 – Lectures 12:00 to 13:00 – Travel to new hotel – inset cost (anti-leisure) <u>13:00 to 19:30 – Leisure</u>	6:30 to 7:00 – Leisure 15:00 to 19:30 – Leisure	6 ½ hours for traveller / 5 hours
Day 10 Saturday	6:30 to 10:30 – Travel to airport, flight, travel to hotel – inset cost (anti leisure) <u>10:00 to 19:30 – Leisure</u>	6:30 to 19:30 – Leisure	9 ½ hours for traveller / 13 hours
Day 11 Sunday	<u>6:30 to 10:30 – Leisure</u> 10:30 to 13:30 – Travel to airport, passport control, boarding procedures – inset costs (anti-leisure) 13:30 to next day, in airplane – inset costs (anti-leisure)	6:30 to 19:30 – Leisure	4 hours for traveller / 13 hours
Day 12 Monday	6:30 to 10:30 – In plane, passport control, travel to home – inset cost (anti-leisure) 15:00 to 19:30 – Leisure	6:30 to 7:00 – Leisure 15:00 to 19:30 – Leisure	4 ½ hours for traveller / 5 hours

<sup>a</sup>Anti-leisure is a term coined to refer to activities which are not necessarily pleasurable, for example preparing travel documentation, compulsory reading and preparations, time spent in airport queues and at customs. This includes the time spent flying in economy class, which most will consider as being uncomfortable and strenuous

Adding up the hours available in Table 1 reveals that the person attending the training course has 57 leisure hours available compared to the 69 leisure hours available to the person not attending the course. The denominator for both is the same, as a day has an equal amount of time whether spent travelling or at home. The balance in terms of time available for leisure seems to be in favour of the person not attending the course. This should be seen against the background of the amount of time spent on stressful activities (anti-leisure) by the traveller. This amounted to at least 50 hours. Given the aforementioned equation, attending the course provided no time towards leisure benefits. In fact, attending the course provided less time for

leisure than staying at home and included the added strain of the anti-leisure activities.

An analysis of Table 1 reveals that the only day the traveller benefited from attending the course, with reference to leisure time, was on Day 2, where the course attendee had 10 ½ hours for leisure compared to the 5 hours available to the non-attending person. This could be seen as a free day. It should also be noted that long distance flights to the west (South Africa to the USA), are often followed by longer sleep periods immediately after the flight (Takahashi, Nakata, and Arito, 2002). This may be expected, particularly after a 17-hour flight, and a 6-hour time difference. Upon arrival in the USA this was exactly what the attendee

did, diluting the leisure (and possible tourism) time available upon arrival.

When considering the “sponsored” money available for tourism, the amount afforded by the university for course attendance, as per the university travel policy, is applicable. The university where the author (attendee of the course) resides provided no funds for additional tourism activities, and a subsistence subsidy was only provided for the duration of the course (Unisa, 2011). Additional travel was at the traveller’s own expense. However, the university normally provides the opportunity to use discretion in terms of the booking of flights around the dates of courses, allowing for longer stays, at the traveller’s own expense. As such, the financial position of the person attending the course is in no way different from that of the person not attending the course. The attendee, however, had the opportunity, at his own cost, to engage in tourism.

Given the aforementioned, it would be an omission to state that there are no direct monetary gains, which may be used towards leisure travel, in attending a course at a foreign university. The university pays staff on foreign visits a subsistence allowance, calculated according to the guidelines set out in the Government Gazette (Republic of South Africa, 2015). The money is intended to be spent on travel to and from the airport and the course, as well as on any other miscellaneous costs. The amount allocated for these expenses is generous, and in this specific case it amounted to just less than US\$ 700. If you argue that an average taxi fare costs \$50 (tip included), and on this visit a total of eight trips was necessary, the amount erodes to \$300. It could then be argued that the monetary gain of a person attending the course is \$300 more than that of the non-attendee.

## **Discussion**

The results indicate that the amount of leisure gains associated with attending the particular course was (in absolute terms) not in favour of the person who attended the course (57 of leisure hours for the attendee and 69 hours for the non-attendee), although in this case the attendee gained a day (Day 2 in Table 1) of leisure. This came at the expense of 50 anti-leisure hours, for the attendee. Would the attendee have arrived at the course on the day it started and left on the same day it ended, he would have been approximately \$300 richer. This would probably have been at the expense of optimal functioning at the course, as long distance travel affects sleeping patterns negatively (Takahashi et al., 2002). In practical terms, the attendee gained one day’s additional leisure and US\$ 300, at a foreign destination, at the cost of 50 hours of anti-leisure.

Without disregarding the one day as negligible, and \$300 as small change, it was undoubtedly beneficial to attend the course. Interaction with individuals in a foreign country has academic benefits (Breen, 2012; Roget et al., 2013), which should not be disregarded. This attendee benefited from these aspects while attending the course, and to a lesser extent also while busy with tourist activities. Furthermore, attending foreign universities and academia is beneficial to the self-esteem of the academics who engage in such activities (Caesar, 1999). This was also experienced by the attendee, as the university he attended is a prestigious institution, and an association with such a university will have a positive spill over effect (Tesser, Millar, and Moore 1988). Overall, academic tourism has great potential and offers a number of significant advantages (Roget et al., 2013). However, this remains a complex matter, and reaches beyond educational, leisure and monetary gains. It could also include the ecological footprint of academic travel (Nevins, 2014) and personal health issues (Takahashi et al., 2002).

## Recommendations

Sceptics of academics travelling to foreign destinations and those who accuse them of opportunism are encouraged to quantify their arguments and not to criticise those who travel for academic purposes. As this study was based on the experience of only one academic traveller, it is recommended that studies on this topic should report on the experiences of other travellers as well. It is further recommended that a full spectrum of outcomes associated with academic tourism be investigated, going beyond leisure and monetary gains, and that it should also include aspects such as actual inter-cultural interactions, and the quality of such interactions. These exchanges may, as reported earlier, have direct academic (and pedagogical) implications. More research in this regard is recommended. Lastly, on a practical level, given the empirical evidence on the strains associated with long distance travel, as reported in numerous empirical studies and as experienced by this author, it is recommended that academics engaging in such visits be afforded a period to recuperate after such an experience.

*Academic travel: Lots of mobility, limited tourism.*

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