

World view



By Kara Hanson

Why we moved a conference from Canada to Indonesia

Event organizers often overlook the visa-related difficulties that researchers in low- and middle-income countries face. This must change.

Selecting the venue for a global academic conference brings both opportunities and challenges. There are competing pressures: minimizing costs and travel distances for attendees while ensuring access to high-quality facilities and a reputable local university partner. However, one issue has become increasingly important: ease of access to travel visas.

Because immigration policies have tightened in some countries, particularly in North America and Europe, waiting times for visas have increased. For example, it can take Canadian visa authorities up to 18 months to process an application from someone in South Africa, according to the government's immigration services website.

Such visa-related difficulties impede global scientific dialogue and the free exchange of ideas. I've become keenly aware of these issues as the president of the International Health Economics Association (IHEA) and tasked with planning a congress for July.

Organizing a global gathering of academics involves many months of planning. In 2023, we had selected Calgary, Canada, as the venue for the 2025 congress, after assessing submissions from several potential hosts. However, in April 2024, an IHEA committee member alerted us to the difficulties that researchers were encountering in obtaining visitor visas.

We explored workarounds, such as expediting the abstract submission and selection process and registering with the Canadian immigration department's Special Events Liaison Unit. But these steps were insufficient. In May 2024, the IHEA board took the difficult decision to shift the conference to Bali, Indonesia. While looking for a new location, our main concern was finding a country with a more permissive visa regime than Canada's. However, we also needed support from a strong local organizing committee and a venue big enough to accommodate our group.

We have been thinking more carefully about geographical equity and the convenience of our members, who are distributed around the globe. In the past, the meeting mainly alternated between Europe and North America, although we have held it once in China and once in Australia, and the last congress was held in South Africa – attracting participants from 106 countries.

We've now learnt that we need to consider visa equity, too. Meaningful academic discourse is not possible if important conferences are a venue only for those who can travel with relative ease. An informed global dialogue on crucial issues, such as health economics and policy, requires

“**Visa-related difficulties impede global scientific dialogue and the free exchange of ideas.”**

contributions from a diverse group of participants.

To our relief, there was no backlash from our membership when the decision to shift the venue was announced. On the contrary, we received e-mails from colleagues all over the world thanking the IHEA for its action, and for recognizing the challenges faced by researchers from low- and middle-income countries, who tend to have the greatest problems obtaining a visa.

But this is not just a problem of rich nations versus poorer ones – although visa constraints in Europe, Canada and the United States are widely recognized as onerous, some low- and middle-income countries also impose restrictions. For instance, visa denials affecting many participants at the Health Systems Research symposium in Bogotá in 2022 led some researchers to boycott the event.

Visa discrimination – unfair or differential treatment of individuals based on nationality or other characteristics – is clearly at the root of the problem. But conference organizers are not always sensitive to such discrimination.

Everyone loses from the status quo. Researchers who cannot attend miss out on being part of the global academic community. Those who do attend miss out on meeting brilliant colleagues from all over the world and expanding their knowledge and contacts. Academic associations lose the opportunity to broaden their membership and activities in under-represented regions. Even host countries lose out, forfeiting potential tourism income if they have strict visa policies.

Several lessons can be drawn from our experience. First, academic societies should think deeply and early about the location of their conferences. Varying where the meeting is held in terms of both latitude and longitude helps attendees share the time and cost of travel more equitably.

Second, it's important to be informed by data. Websites such as passport index (see go.nature.com/4qgmcfh) provide statistics on visa regimes and can help meeting organizers to identify the locations that are least restrictive – countries where 'visa on arrival' or fully online application systems are available.

Third, in addition to the visa process, the existence of local laws that criminalize personal freedoms, such as homosexuality, could restrict participation. Every effort must be made by organizers to ensure that attendees are able to bring their true selves to an event.

Finally, because some researchers might not be able to attend or present their work in person even with the best efforts of organizers, hybrid events should be embraced.

In an era of profound social, economic and political challenges, fostering global collaboration between researchers is more crucial than ever. By prioritizing inclusivity and maximizing accessibility, conference organizers can create spaces in which all researchers can participate fully.

Kara Hanson is the president of the International Health Economics Association and a professor at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine.
e-mail: kara.hanson@lshtm.ac.uk