

## RESEARCH NOTE

### IN TIMES OF RESTRICTED MOBILITY: CANCEL, CHANGE DATE, OR CHANGE FORMAT OF TOURISM CONFERENCES

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The aim of this article is to examine how tourism conference organizers react to the restricted mobility incurred by the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Do they cancel, change format, or change date for the event? This study contributes to an initial analysis of how organizers of international academic conferences in the tourism and hospitality industry deal with whole groups of participants who are no longer mobile and therefore cannot actively network personally. This uniquely compiled data covers a large representative number of conferences in this field. A Multinomial Logit model is used to estimate the options available. Data are based on unique information on almost 100 conferences, meetings, and congresses in the tourism and hospitality sector, including related fields such as leisure and recreation, planned to be held during the period of March to November 2020. Descriptive evidence shows that approximately one out of five conferences changes to a virtual format, somewhat more than half moves the date (mainly to the year 2021), and the remaining 25% cancel the event without alternative offers. Estimation results reveal that the decision to change to an online format increases nonlinearly over time in the form of an inverse U-shaped curve. This indicates a certain resistance to virtual conferences, although with more time for planning, a gradual adaptation to the actual situation appears to be possible. Longer conferences are less likely to change format. The probability of cancellations is lower for association conferences, which are held regularly.

**Key words:** Cancellation; Video conferencing; Virtual conference; Online conference; Travel; Tourism and hospitality; Multinomial Logit model

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#### Introduction

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, conference organizers have two decisions to make if they do not want to cancel: either

change the date or the format of the conference. Virtual conferences are often seen as alternatives to personal events even if there are several disadvantages (Falk & Hagsten, 2021; Hamm et al., 2018; Høyer & Naess, 2001; Klöwer et al., 2020). Mair

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(2015) concluded that hybrid and virtual conferences involve a high-level technology interface, have no fixed location, and are less constrained by time and space considerations. A change of format requires careful preparation and planning time, which is not always available when something unexpected and sudden appears. Most conference organizers were surprised by the speed and intensity of the COVID-19 pandemic and could not adjust the format on short notice.

The purpose of this article is to investigate how tourism conference organizers react to the restricted mobility incurred by the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Do they cancel, change format, or change date for the event? A Multinomial Logit model is used to estimate the options available. Data are based on unique information on 96 conferences, meetings, and congresses in the field of tourism and hospitality, including related areas such as leisure and recreation, planned to be held during the period of March to November 2020. Descriptive evidence reveals that one out of five conferences changes format to virtual, somewhat more than half changes the date (mainly to the year 2021), and the remaining 25% cancel the event without further offerings. Predatory conferences are excluded from the study.

Academic conferences are an important but underresearched business sector (Chen & Tham, 2019; Mair, 2015). Previous work on conference management has focused on the economic impacts of conferences (Jones & Li, 2015), meeting participation decisions and motivations as well as satisfaction (Severt et al., 2007), conference and meeting technology (Hamm et al., 2018), destination management organization, and conference site selection (Crouch et al., 2019). There is also literature on how delegates behave at scientific conferences from a gender perspective (Mair & Frew, 2018) and on barriers to attending tourism and hospitality association conferences (Mair et al., 2018). Several aspects of tourism-related academic conferences such as location, themes, gender, and costs are investigated by Chen and Tham (2019).

This study contributes a first investigation of how organizers of academic tourism conferences proceed when faced with the restrictions imposed in connection with the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic; change format or change date. The work

builds on Falk and Hagsten (2021) and Mubin et al. (2021) that explored conference management in the wake of the pandemic. As opposed to Falk and Hagsten (2021), present analysis focuses on a specific segment of conferences that to a higher degree is intertwined with its local surroundings and hosts than academic conferences in general. Subsequently, the empirical approach employed, the Multinomial Logit model is also more sophisticated than earlier approaches employed. Mubin et al. (2021) presented descriptive evidence on how computer science and psychology conferences change during the pandemic.

The structure of the study is as follows: section 2 outlines the conceptual background and the empirical model while section 3 provides descriptive statistics and the data used for the study. The empirical results appear in section 4 and section 5 concludes.

### Conceptual Background and Empirical Approach

After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic conference organizers face a new world. Individual mobility is vastly restricted and face-to-face conferences are very difficult to hold, even nationally. This means that organizers need to consider whether they should cancel, change format, or change date for the conference. Conference- and location-specific factors may play a role in this decision. Studies find that several factors are important for the selection of conference sites (Crouch et al., 2019; Falk & Hagsten, 2018; Hansen et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020). These include characteristics of the location (infrastructure, costs) and the conference venue. These factors may also be important when changing the format or date.

By using the random utility theory as a starting point, the conference organizer is expected to choose the alternative that gives the highest benefit. A change to virtual format may be preferable to keep contact between an academic association and its members, for instance. Access to high-speed broadband at the planned conference or nearby could be related to the benefits. Lee et al. (2012) found that the availability of “high-speed Internet” and “wireless connectivity” are important characteristics for choosing a conference center. A prerequisite for this is the availability of high-speed Internet in the country of the planned conference location.

The costs and benefits of changing date or canceling the conference could also vary across type of conference and venue as well as location-specific factors. Congress tourists may not only be interested in the meetings themselves, but also in cultural, sporting, and entertainment activities (Pechlaner et al., 2007). Rittichainuwat et al. (2001) found that international conferences that take place near major tourist attractions may increase attendance. Thus, the presence of attractions, such as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (WHS) in a host city may be related to the decision on how to proceed with the conference. For instance, opportunities to confer close by or with special guided cultural tours cannot be substituted for online meetings. Conference organizers are also likely to have contracts with the venue planned for the event (Riley & Perogiannis, 1990; Swarbrooke & Horner, 2001), limiting the alternatives because of high cancellation fees.

Time or planning horizon is another important factor that affects the possibility to change format. Conferences normally have long lead times with many of them being planned more than a year in advance (Norman, 2000). This means that large last-minute changes are difficult to implement, such as changing to a completely new format. In the theory of diffusion of innovations and ideas introduced by Rogers (2003), time is an essential aspect in the development of adoption. Anecdotal evidence of this is shown by the marked surge in general use of virtual meetings (see [www.10times.com](http://www.10times.com), which is the world's largest directory of conferences, seminars, summits, business meetings). Nevertheless, academic tourism conferences are special kinds of meetings, where the spontaneous and informal part has a stronger focus (Oppermann, 1997). Hobson (1993) stressed that academic conferences in tourism and hospitality have a particularly strong focus on networking and building personal relationships (see also Edelheim et al., 2018). Thus, tourism conferences could be less easily replaced by virtual events, even if other alternatives are limited.

The different choices available can be specified as a function of organizer and location-specific factors. This includes the size and length of the conference (number of conference days), type of venue, as well as relation to an association. In addition, country-specific (speed of broadband internet) and city-specific factors (presence of a UNESCO world

heritage site) can be considered. In the following, the three choices,  $j$ , are distinguished: (a) cancellation, (b) change format, and (c) change date. These alternatives provide the conference organizer with a given utility depending on monetary or nonmonetary returns. In line with the random utility theory, it is possible to determine an indirect utility function for each decision  $j$  where the utility,  $U$ , depends on a systematic part,  $V$  and a random part,  $\varepsilon$  and where  $i$  denotes the individual conference:

$$U_{ij} = V_{ij} + \varepsilon_{ij}.$$

The systematic part of the utility function is modeled as a linear function of observable characteristics including several association, conference, and location-specific variables as well as the time since the start of the pandemic with  $\alpha_j$  as the constant for alternative  $j$ .

$V_{ij} = \alpha_j + \beta_{jT}TIME_i + \sum_{D=1}^2 \beta_{jD}DAYS_i^D + \beta_{jV}VENUE_i + \beta_{jA}ASSOCIATION_i + \beta_{jS}LN(INTERNETSPEED)_i + \beta_{jW}WHS_i + \sum_{L=1}^2 \beta_{jL}LOCATION_i^L$ , where variable  $TIME$  denotes the number of days since the start of the pandemic March 2 (first canceled conference) and  $DAYS$  reflects two dummy variables for the length of the conference, with a 1–2 days conference as the reference category.  $VENUE$  gives information on whether the conference is held at a hotel or conference center (equal to one), zero otherwise (university or research institution). Dummy variable  $ASSOCIATION$  is equal to one if the conference is organized by an association and  $INTERNETSPEED$  indicates broadband speed at the country level,  $WHS$  denotes whether the city is or has a world heritage site, and  $LOCATION$  is a set of two dummy variables for the planned location of the conference (North America and EU-countries with the remaining countries as the reference group).

Because the categories are unordered, the Multinomial Logit model can be used with one alternative used as the reference category, in this case the most frequent one: change of date. The probability,  $P(J|X)$ , of alternative  $j = 2, \dots, J$  being chosen by the conference organizer  $i$  is calculated as follows:

$$P(J | X) = \frac{\exp(X' \beta_j)}{1 + \sum_{h=2}^J \exp(X' \beta_h)}$$

Vector X represents the explanatory variables introduced above. The Multinomial Logit model is estimated by maximum likelihood (see Greene, 2019).

### Data and Descriptive Statistics

Conference data for the study originate from the website Atlas (Association for Tourism and Leisure Education and Research, <http://www.atlas-euro.org/events.aspx>) or from Trinet (Tourism Research Information Network, <https://tinyurl.com/vn7pca8f>) and refer to events planned to be held between the beginning of March and the end August of 2020 (Appendix). The field of conferences includes mainly tourism and hospitality but also related fields such as events & festivals, leisure, recreation, and sport economics & management. All types of conferences and meetings are included such as colloquium, conference, congress, meeting, summit, symposium, and workshop. Information on number of days of the conference, type of venue, location (city and country), change of format, change of date, or cancellation is derived from the conference website. Broadband speed at the country level is provided by Howdle and Ashton (2019). It is assumed that conferences planned for a specific location are still held in the same country and not in the country of the underlying association. Information on world heritage sites is provided by UNESCO (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/>).

The dataset encompasses 96 conferences planned to be held during the period March to

November 2020. Descriptive statistics show that the majority of conferences span over 3 or more days and are held at universities or research institutions (Table 1). In one out of four cases, the city is a UNESCO world heritage city or hosts such a site. Most conferences are located in Europa and North America (76%) and are connected with a scientific Association (82%). Two out of five tourism conferences are held in a hotel, which is twice as many compared with academic conferences in the field of general social sciences (Falk & Hagsten, 2021).

The percentage of virtual academic conferences is strongly increasing over time with the proportions of 4% in March and April changing to almost 50% for conferences planned for September to November (Table 2). Compared with other fields this is a low proportion; Falk and Hagsten (2021) reported the highest proportion of virtual conferences in the computer science field, reaching 80% in the summer of 2020 and Mubin et al. (2021) found similar results (76%). Most academic tourism conferences in the field of tourism are moved to a future date (53%).

### Empirical Results

Multinomial Logit estimations show that the probability to change to virtual format instead of changing date depends on the length of the planning horizon (from the start of the pandemic to the planned date for the conference) and the length of the academic conference (Table 3). Other

Table 1  
Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Number of days since March 2	104	62	9	261
Download speed of broadband internet (mbps)	23.0	12.7	2.7	85.0
<b>Dummy variables</b>				
1–2 days conference	0.22			
3 days conference	0.42			
4+ days conference	0.36			
Venue is hotel	0.42			
City is UNESCO World Heritage Site	0.26			
Association conference	0.82			
Location in North America	0.16			
Location in Europe	0.50			
Location elsewhere	0.34			

Note. Source: Atlas, Trinet, Website of the conferences, UNESCO, Howdle and Ashton (2019).

Table 2  
Academic Conferences in Tourism and Hospitality Over Time

	Cancellation	Change Format to Virtual	Change Date	Conferences Number
Month 3–4	25.0%	4.2%	70.8%	24
Month 5–6	28.6%	23.8%	47.6%	42
Month 7–8	26.7%	20.0%	53.3%	15
Month 9–11	13.3%	46.7%	40.0%	15
Months 3–11	25.0%	21.9%	53.1%	96

Note. Month 3 refers to March. Sources: see Table 1.

conference or location-specific characteristics, including internet speed, are not relevant.

There is also evidence that the likelihood of changing to virtual format significantly increases over time. A marginal effect of 0.0015 means that conferences that are planned 100 days after the start of the pandemic have a 15% higher probability to change format. The predicted probability of changing to virtual format increases from near zero at the beginning of March to about 40% after 180 days and then stagnates (Fig. 1). A different pattern is found for the predicted probability of cancellation, which rises slightly until day 90 and then decreases. Finally, the predicted probability of changing the date appears as an inverse U-shaped relationship. However, at the end of the sampling period the confidence interval widens, so that the influence of time becomes less precise.

Thus, the results verify that time is an important factor for the format of the conference. It takes

time to change the format to an online conference, including adjustments to venue, technology, time zones, registration fees, et cetera.

Size of the conference is also important. Conferences that are planned to be held over 3 days have a 20% lower likelihood to go online. The remaining determinants such as location of the conference (EU or North America), type of venue, and whether the conference is organized by an association are not significant.

A conference held by an academic association has a 22% lower probability of being canceled. One explanation for this is that associations often hold annual conferences for their members, so that the conference can easily be moved to the same place and time next year. An important but not measurable factor is the general purpose of an academic conference: the informal interactions and the opportunities to form new collaborations, for instance. The lack of these opportunities may

Table 3  
Probability of Conference Alternatives, Multinomial Logit Estimations (Marginal Effects)

	Cancellation		Change Format		Change Date	
	$dy/dx$	$z$ Stat	$dy/dx$	$z$ Stat	$dy/dx$	$z$ Stat
Number of days since March 2	0.000	-0.56	0.0015**	2.03	-0.001	-0.99
3 days conference (ref 1–2 days)	0.076	0.56	-0.229**	-2.07	0.153	0.98
4+ days conference	-0.103	-0.75	-0.075	-0.71	0.178	1.07
Venue is hotel	0.004	0.04	-0.060	-0.61	0.057	0.50
City is UNESCO WHS	0.170	1.49	0.029	0.29	-0.199	-1.54
Association conference	-0.217*	-1.94	0.100	0.84	0.117	0.83
Location North America (ref. other)	0.300*	1.65	0.034	0.21	-0.333	-1.64
Location Europe	0.171	1.20	0.093	0.75	-0.265*	-1.71
Log download speed broadband	-0.093	-0.96	0.000	0.00	0.094	0.95

Note. The marginal effect ( $dy/dx$ ) measures the change in the probability of choosing a destination following a discrete alteration in every single independent variable. The marginal effects are calculated at sample means using the multinomial logit estimations and cluster adjusted standard errors at the city level. McFadden's  $R^2$ : 0.151 and maximum likelihood  $R^2$ : 0.264.

\*\*, \*Statistical significance at the 5% and 10% level.

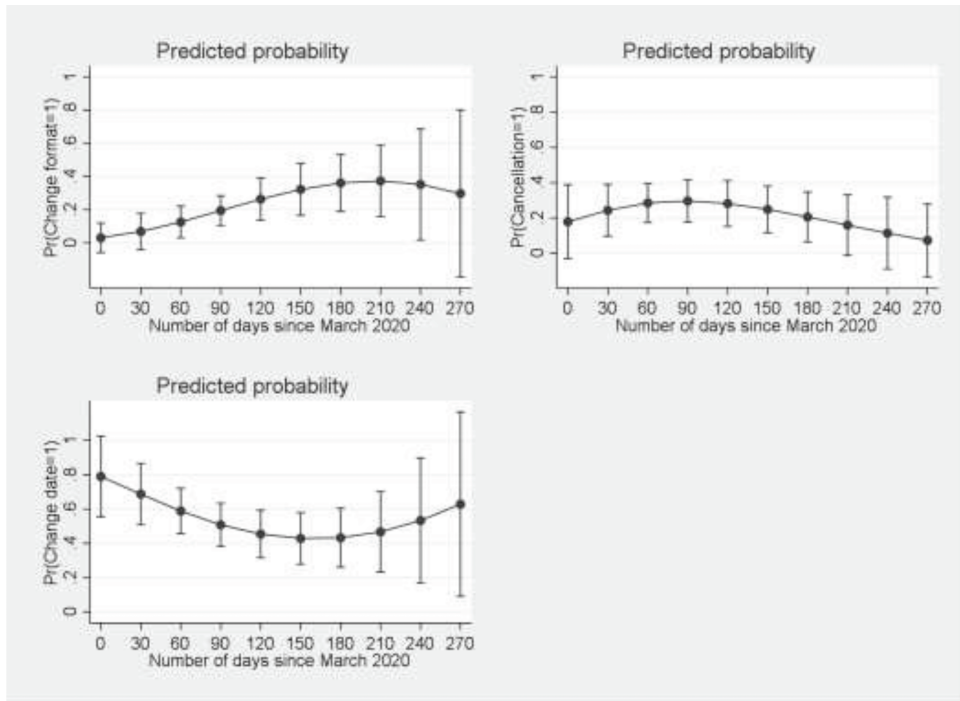


Figure 1. Relationship between time since start of the COVID-19 outbreak and choice of the conference format. Note: The graphs show the predicted probability for the different choices and the 95% confidence level. The predicted probabilities are calculated using the estimations in Table 3 and including a squared term of number of days.

explain why conferences, as opposed to business meetings in general, change date or cancel rather than change format.

In comparison with conferences in general fields of social sciences, the technology variable (broadband download speed) is of no importance, possibly because the adoption of virtual conferences can be a slow process (Falk & Hagsten, 2021). This indicates that conference organizers may act differently depending on their special circumstances and needs as stated in the conceptual background.

Several robustness analyses are performed. A critical point of the Multinomial Logit model is the violation of the property of independence of irrelevant alternatives (IIA). The model assumes that the choice between two alternatives is independent of the other alternatives. Therefore, simpler models such as the Logit model explaining the likelihood of online conferences are conducted. This leads to similar results for the marginal effects. Another robustness check encompasses a Multilevel

Multinomial Logit estimation that allows the error term to vary across countries or conference locations. The results show that the estimations are not sensitive to the estimation method (all results are available upon request).

## Conclusions

This study investigates how tourism conference organizers react to the restricted mobility incurred by the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Do they cancel, change format, or change date for the event? One out of five conferences in tourism and hospitality planned to be held between March and November 2020 changed format to virtual. A Multinomial Logit model is used to estimate the probability of the different choices. Factors of importance include conference and location specifics as well as timeline since the start of the pandemic. Results show that the likelihood to change format to virtual increases strongly over time and


that conferences with an expected duration of 3 days are less likely to change format. Other factors do not play a role.

As opposed to business meetings and academic conferences in general fields of social sciences, virtual tourism conferencing has not fully taken off. Although time and size are of importance, additional unmeasurable aspects behind this could be ties to hosts or local venues or the loss of informal interaction, which is difficult to substitute. There

are several possibilities for future work. One is to investigate the willingness to participate in and pay for virtual conferences. Another idea is to explore the pricing strategy of virtual conferences in terms of a reduced participation fee.

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#### Appendix: List of Tourism and Hospitality Conferences Between March and November 2020

Name	Status
5th International Conference on Sport Economics & Sport Management (SESM)	virtual
NASSM 2020 Conference North American Society for Sport Management	virtual
EASS 2020 Conference Sport, Diversity and Social Change	postponed
2020 National Environment and Recreation Research Symposium	cancelled
2020 National Outdoor Recreation Conference - HDgov.	postponed
Sequor Conference on Experience Design	cancelled
The 2020 Conference on the Value of Play: PLAY FOR ALL	virtual
16th Canadian Congress on Leisure Research (CCLR16)	postponed
Leisure Studies Association Conference: Leisure Pasts, Presents and Futures	cancelled
Pinggu – Beijing World Leisure Congress 2020 Call for Abstracts new deadline is 31st. of January 2020!	postponed
12th Workshop “Tourism Economics and Management. Tourists as Consumers, Visitors and Travelers”	virtual
TEFI 2020 - What’s Tourism Got to Do with It? Re-Purposing Tourism: Engaging our Radical in Tourism Education	virtual
International Conference THE INC 2020: Revisiting Value Co-creation and Co-destruction in Tourism, Hospitality and Events	virtual
Resilience & Recovery of Tourism Communities	virtual
Fifth International Conference on Tourism & Leisure Studies	virtual
Enabling Tourism to Integrate Ame Economies to Cope with Climate Change	virtual later date
EATSA - Global Tourism: Connecting Insularities in Asia and Europe	virtual
ICOT - Tourism in Uncertain Times: Issues and challenges	virtual later date
7th International Conference on Hospitality and Tourism Management (ICOHT 2020)	virtual later date
TEBEC	virtual later date
9th International Conference on Sustainable Tourism	virtual
5th Biennial Conference of the Association of Critical Heritage Studies (ACHS)	virtual
The 2nd International Research Workshop on Wine Tourism will take place 17 - 18 September 2020 at Santorini, Greece	virtual
11th World Congress on Snow and Mountain Tourism	postponed
Global Hospitality and Tourism Conference – 2020 on Experiential Management and Marketing (GHTC-2020)	postponed
T-forum 2020 Global Conference on Tourism	postponed
11th Annual International Wine Tourism Conference, Exhibition & Workshop (IWINETC)	postponed
International Tourism and Travel Dynamics Congress	postponed
International Conference on Societal Relationships with Nature in Tourism	cancelled
3rd International Conference on Tourism Research ICTR 2020	postponed
25th International Joint World Cultural Tourism Conference	postponed
2020 International Conference on Hospitality, Tourism, and Sports Management (HTSM)	postponed
ISA RC50 Interim Conference 2020 The Power of Tourism: Contested Representations of People and Places	cancelled
Managing Tourism across Continents - Tourism for a better World	postponed
4th edition of the Heritage, Tourism and Hospitality, International Conference	cancelled
World Indigenous Tourism Summit (WITS) 2020	postponed
11th International Conference Sustainable Tourism, Culture & Sports	postponed
7th Quantitative Approaches in Tourism Economics and Management (QATEM) Workshop	cancelled

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Name	Status
Tourism Think Tank International Summit	cancelled
Tourism, Hospitality, and Event Conference for Researchers, Educators, Practitioners, and Students (THEREPS)	postponed
2nd Tourist International Conference - Sustainable Tourism: Shaping a Better Future	postponed
1st International Conference Rural Tourism – Challenges, Scope and Entrepreneurship Development ICRTCPLD2020	postponed
2020 TTRA Europe Chapter Conference April 2020	postponed
25th Biennial International Congress Tourism & Hospitality Industry 2020	cancelled
2nd Tourist International Conference - Sustainable Tourism: Shaping a Better Future	postponed
International Conference on Peace, Environment and Tourism	cancelled
Tourism and International Labels – Protection and Commercialization	cancelled
Building a More Sustainable and Resilient Future	postponed
International Tourism Conference - INVTUR 2020, Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals: From Theory to Practice	postponed
Council for Hospitality Management Education (CHME) 2020 “Creating Hospitality Experiences: Authenticity in an emerging world of Hyper-Reality”	postponed
8th International Student Conference in Tourism Research 2020 ISCONTOUR 2020	cancelled
5th Tourism Research Network PhD/ECR Symposium	cancelled
4th International Research Symposium in Tourism, Hospitality and Events	postponed
Tourism Naturally Conference 2020	postponed
Asia Pacific CHRIE	postponed
Global Health and Medical Tourism	postponed
ANATOLIA - 7th Interdisciplinary Tourism Research	cancelled
SSTD - Challenges in Tourism Development	cancelled
5th International Scientific Conference: Tourism in Function of Development of the Republic of Serbia - Tourism and Rural Development	postponed
The Objects of Travel and Tourism: Materials, Materiality and Experience	postponed
Pilgrimages and Tourism International Conference	cancelled
8th International Conference on Innovations in Travel Modeling (ITM)	cancelled
TTRA 2020 Annual International Conference	cancelled
7th International Conference of the International Association of Cultural and Digital Tourism (IACuDiT) “Culture and Tourism in a Smart, Globalized and Sustainable World	postponed
Humanising the Academy: A Tourism Conference for All	postponed
Wildlife Tourism Conference Brisbane 2020	postponed
International Small Islands Studies Association (ISISA) Conference 2020: Sharing Lessons, Sharing Stories	postponed
4th Hospitality Finance & Economics Research Conference	cancelled
BEST EN THINK TANK - Smart Tourism for Sustainable Destinations THINK TANK XX	postponed
12th IRTP Conference at Catholic University of Portugal, Braga	postponed
3rd ICOHOTH (International Congress of HealthOriented Tourism & Hospitality) Conference	postponed
Asia Pacific Tourism Association (APTA) 26th Annual Conference	cancelled
2020 International Conference on Hospitality, Leisure, Sports, and Tourism	postponed
12th International Conference on Islands Tourism	postponed
1st International Conference on New Trends in Tourism & Hospitality (INCONTH 2020),	postponed
10th Advances in Hospitality and Tourism Marketing and Management (AHTMM) Conference	postponed
17th Borders and Crossings Travel Writing Conference: Travelling Differently	cancelled
Annual International Council on Hotel Restaurant & Institutional Education Conference (Annual ICHRIE Conference)	postponed
3rd Critical Tourism Studies – North America	postponed
8th International Tourism Studies Association (ITSA) Biennial Conference 2020	postponed
10th International Conference on Monitoring and Management of Visitors in Recreational and Protected Areas (MMV10)	postponed
AIEST Conference of Ideas	cancelled
ATLAS Annual Conference	postponed
Tourism as a Driver or Barrier for Quality of Life	virtual
Rural Tourism – Scope, Challenges and Entrepreneurship Development	virtual
29th Nordic Symposium on Tourism and Hospitality	postponed
10th International Conference on Tourism Management & Related Issues	postponed

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Name	Status
XVII International Colloquium on Tourism - Tourism Sustainability: Over-tourism vs Under-tourism	virtual
TURITEC - ICT and Tourism the 13th ICT and Tourism International Conference	postponed
7th International Polar Tourism Research Network Conference	postponed
T-forum 2020 Global Conference on Tourism	virtual
2nd International Workshop Living with Tourism: Paradoxes, Empowerment and Future Directions	virtual
2020 TTRA Europe Chapter Conference September 2020	virtual
CIT2020 - International Conference on Tourism: Well-being and Peace Through Tourism: Reality or Fiction	postponed
Health meets Food: The Culinary Medicine Conference 2020	postponed
2020 ATLAS Events and Cultural Tourism Special Interest Group (SIG) Meeting	virtual
5th International Conference on Events – “Making New Waves in Africa: Exploring New Frontiers in Festivals and Events”	postponed
Megaevent2020 : City, Events, Mega-events and Tourism	cancelled

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