

# How to make the most of your study budget at conferences

## Introduction

You have had your abstract accepted for a prestigious conference – congratulations! But how do you make the most of this experience? With study budgets being cut and difficulties in getting money reimbursed because of excessive paperwork and red tape (Roueche et al, 2010), it is important to stretch your allowance to the maximum. The implementation of the European Working Time Directive with an increase in the frequency of out-of-hours shift work has also made it more difficult to take study leave (Baxter and Gibson, 2012). The golden rule is to plan early.

## Registering for the conference

This may take up a significant portion of your study budget. Check carefully for any early bird promotions. See whether it is worthwhile joining the society which is organizing the conference as discounts for members can often be substantial. Some conferences last several days and may offer reduced rates if you only want to attend on specific days.

## Hotel choice

Ask if any of your work colleagues or friends are planning on going to the same conference – you could then share a room and split the costs. Conference hotels tend to be expensive and get booked up quickly. Look for alternatives by using [www.tripadvisor.com](http://www.tripadvisor.com); in particular, use its map function to identify recommended hotels or bed and breakfasts that are located near the conference centre or near public trans-

port which allows easy access to the conference centre. Remember that the number of stars does not necessarily correlate with a better hotel; it is simply a guide to the number of amenities offered by the hotel. Use a price comparison website such as [www.kayak.co.uk](http://www.kayak.co.uk) to help identify the best hotel prices. Some hotels have free wifi included – this is extremely useful so that you can keep up to date with your emails while you are away and also check in online for your flights.

Premier Inns in the UK ([www.premierinn.com](http://www.premierinn.com)) are a cut above the rest of the budget hotels, and often have rooms from as little as £19 a night. Similarly, Ibis Budget (formerly known as Etap) hotels, particularly the recently renovated ones, provide basic but comfortable and clean rooms with free wifi ([www.ibis.com/gb/united-kingdom/index.shtml](http://www.ibis.com/gb/united-kingdom/index.shtml)). Alternative good hotel chains include Holiday Inn Express, which includes free breakfast, Ramada Encore and Jurys Inn. If you have not planned in advance and hotel rooms are rapidly being filled, you can check for last minute deals at [www.laterooms.com](http://www.laterooms.com) and [www.lastminute.com](http://www.lastminute.com).

## Travelling

### Getting to the airport

Depending on the airport you need, there are various options. To get to Heathrow from central London, the quickest but most expensive option is the Heathrow Express from Paddington, which takes 15 minutes and runs every 15 minutes. A lesser known but cheaper alternative is Heathrow Connect, which also runs from Paddington but takes 25 minutes and runs every half hour. Other options include the underground, local and regional bus services. For example, Reading and Oxford have frequent and good value coach services to Heathrow. Book in advance for Easybus, which serves Stansted, Luton and Gatwick with one-way fares from £2. Currently, the Gatwick Express has cheaper fares when booked online in advance, and the Stansted Express offers discounts when travelling in groups of two or more.

If you plan to park at the airport, plan in advance as rates can be extremely expen-

sive if you just turn up on the day. Short-term parking tends to be located within walking distance of the passenger terminal. Long-term parking is cheaper, but often requires a bus transfer.

### Which airport to fly from

London Heathrow is the busiest airport in the UK, and has the widest choice of international destinations. However, Heathrow is run at capacity, and any adverse weather conditions can cause long delays. Easyjet and Ryanair have their main bases at Luton, Stansted and Gatwick. You may wish to fly from one of the other regional airports in the UK, which are less busy, cheaper to fly from and may be closer to get to from your home. The disadvantage is that the range of flights may be more limited and if your journey is long haul, this may mean an indirect flight, i.e. having to change planes.

### Short haul flights

The popularity of low cost airlines has kept airfares competitively priced. Full service airlines such as BA are often similarly priced and fly to centrally located airports, unlike some low cost airlines (*Table 1*). This should be factored in when considering the whole cost of the trip.

Note that inflight catering by BA on short-haul flights may be very limited in quantity and variety. Ryanair and Easyjet offer buy-on-board services for food and drink. If you have specific dietary requirements or would like to save money, you may wish to bring your own food on board.

Not all seats within the same cabin are the same. Some are more desirable with extra legroom; others less so being close to the galley or toilets. Visit SeatGuru ([www.seatguru.com](http://www.seatguru.com)) to see which seats are best. Seat selection in advance is available on some airlines if you have elite flyer status, or for a fee for those without.

BA's policy of allowing a small personal item in addition to a standard-sized piece of hand luggage as cabin baggage is particularly useful if you wish to avoid checking in any luggage, as Ryanair and Easyjet only allow one piece of hand luggage.

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**Table 1. Comparison of BA vs low cost airlines (short-haul)**

	BA	Easyjet	Ryanair
In-flight snacks and drinks	Included (but range of snacks limited)	Hot drink + sandwich £6.50	Tea + panini £6.75
Reserving seats (each way)	From £8 in advance, free with online check in 24 hours before departure	From £3 in advance	£10 (reserved seat), £5 priority boarding)
Card fees	Debit card – free, credit card – £4.50	£9 administration fee, credit card + 2.5% of total transaction value	£6 administration fee, credit card + 2% of total transaction value
Cabin baggage	One item of baggage 56 cm x 45 cm x 25 cm plus one laptop, handbag or briefcase	One item of baggage 56 cm x 45 cm x 25 cm only	One item of baggage 55 cm x 40 cm x 20 cm, max weight 10 kg
Checked baggage	One bag 23 kg – free	One bag 20 kg – £4	One bag 20 kg – £5 low season, £35 high season
Airport boarding pass re-issue fee	n/a	n/a	£60

According to Skytrax passenger reviews ([www.airlinequality.com](http://www.airlinequality.com)), Easyjet is favoured over Ryanair. If you chose to travel with Ryanair, make sure you read all the conditions carefully on their website as penalties can add up, e.g. forgetting to print your boarding pass at home, excess baggage, cabin baggage not conforming to their size requirements.

## Long-haul flights

Use price comparison websites such as [www.kayak.co.uk](http://www.kayak.co.uk) to identify the best prices for your flights. Indirect flights are generally cheaper than direct flights, but you need to balance the savings with the inconvenience of a longer trip and the increased chance of missed connections, delays and lost luggage. Some airports are more convenient to connect through, e.g. Amsterdam Schiphol *vs* Paris Charles de Gaulle.

If you would like to combine a holiday with your conference, you can plan an 'open jaw' itinerary, i.e. fly into one city and then back from another. You can book a separate internal flight or hire a car one way. If you plan an open jaw, always save a screenshot of the cost of a return flight to the conference city, as your finance department may only cover the cost of 'conference travel' and not additional travel for personal pleasure. Fortunately, many open jaw itineraries are possible with little change to the price of ticket. For example, return flights to Phoenix, Arizona from London Heathrow with BA cost £736; flying out to Phoenix and flying back from Las Vegas costs just £30 more.

## Trains

If you are attending a conference in France, consider taking the Eurostar and connect-

ing to the TGV at Lille, which involves just a platform change, rather than connecting at Paris, which may require transit to a different rail station. Visit [www.seat61.com](http://www.seat61.com) for excellent advice regarding train travel in Europe.

Similarly, taking a train domestically may be less hassle than dealing with busy airports or driving long distances. Scotrail offers overnight sleeper services from London Euston to Scotland, which saves on travelling time and hotel costs. Bargain berths are available from £19 one way ([www.scotrail.co.uk/sleeper](http://www.scotrail.co.uk/sleeper)). These are released 12 weeks in advance every Friday morning, so plan early to get the cheapest seats. A sleeper service from London Paddington to Cornwall is also operated by First Great Western ([www.firstgreatwestern.co.uk/Your-journey/Night-Riviera-Sleeper](http://www.firstgreatwestern.co.uk/Your-journey/Night-Riviera-Sleeper)).

## Packing

The key is to pack light. Consider bringing only hand luggage to avoid checking in baggage which may be lost. Wear your suit on the plane to avoid creasing and to free up space in your hand luggage. Bring an emergency pack of medication, e.g. paracetamol, loperamide or antibiotics, in case it is difficult to find a pharmacy in your conference city.

Always pre-order your foreign currency before travelling; do not buy at the last minute at the airport as the exchange rates will be poor. Shop around online for the most competitive rates. If you wish to make purchases on your card abroad, beware of the overseas transaction fee charged by your bank, which may be as much as 3% of the amount spent. Do not forget your travel insurance; excellent

advice can be found on [www.moneysavingexpert.com/insurance/cheap-travel-insurance](http://www.moneysavingexpert.com/insurance/cheap-travel-insurance).

## Food and drink

Eating breakfast or dinner at the hotel may be very expensive if not booked as part of a package. When making your hotel booking, check if breakfast is included. Some hotels offer a meal deal; for example when staying at a Premier Inn, a 3-course dinner, a drink and a full breakfast are included for a £22.99 supplement. If eating at the hotel is expensive, check on [www.tripadvisor.com](http://www.tripadvisor.com) to identify local cafes or restaurants that are highly rated and good value.

## Receipts

Carry a small envelope to store all your receipts, including all local transport and meals, as most hospital trusts and universities will not reimburse you unless you provide evidence when submitting your claims.

## Sponsorship

If your study budget does not cover the entire cost of the trip, ask your supervisor or consultant if there are specific local research funds that could cover the shortfall, especially if the work you are presenting has been supported by them. Check with your hospital, university and deanery. National Institute for Health Research-funded Academic Clinical Fellows and Academic Clinical Lecturers are eligible for an annual bursary of £1000 from the National Institute for Health Research. The Royal college of your specialty may also provide bursaries for presenting at conferences. Also look at specific research

charities and societies, e.g. Cancer Research UK or the British Association for Cancer Research Student Travel awards ([www.bacr.org.uk/fellowships-and-bursaries/student-awards/](http://www.bacr.org.uk/fellowships-and-bursaries/student-awards/)) or the Society for Endocrinology ([www.endocrinology.org/grants/grant\\_sfe-overseas.html](http://www.endocrinology.org/grants/grant_sfe-overseas.html)). Certain research fellowships also include a small travel allowance for presenting at conferences. The conference organizers may also offer awards by open competition to the best abstracts. It is also worth checking to see if pharmaceutical companies can offer some sponsorship.

## Preparation for presentation

### Poster presentation

The most economical way of preparing your poster is to design it yourself in PowerPoint or a similar programme, and then get it printed by a poster printing company. Make sure you check the dimensions and layout of posters at the conference before printing (e.g. portrait or landscape). Some airlines are very strict about whether poster tubes are counted as part of your cabin baggage allowance. To avoid losing your poster as checked baggage, consider printing a fabric poster ([www.redcliffe.co.uk/poster-printing-foldable.htm](http://www.redcliffe.co.uk/poster-printing-foldable.htm)). These can be folded up into your cabin baggage, with minimal creasing. When you reach your destination, a light iron will remove most of the creases before hanging. Alternatively, some conferences offer a service that prints and delivers your poster to the conference venue, ready for you to collect on arrival.

Some conferences now require short 5-minute presentations by the poster. If this is the case, keep it short and simple by basing it on your abstract. Imagine you are giving a pitch in an elevator, and that you

are trying to convince your audience why your work is interesting and important. Highlight the key findings and conclusions and avoid going into too much detail; there will be opportunities for questions later.

### Oral presentation

Check the conference for oral presentation guidelines and stick to the time limit. Make note of the maximum number of slides and the need for a disclosure statement. Some societies will arrange for you to have an invited discussant after your presentation – if this is the case, you will usually need to send your slides to him/her beforehand.

Prepare your slides on PowerPoint. Your university or laboratory may have a PowerPoint template which could be used for either oral or poster presentation. In addition, previous videos of past oral presentation and posters are often kept for a length of time on the conference websites, and can give an indication of what is required.

Learn your presentation by heart. Present to your supervisor, friends and colleagues well before the conference. Keep things simple and allow approximately 1 minute per slide. Think about whether your slides will be visible to the audience sitting at the back; make sure your legends are large enough and use contrasting colours to maximize clarity. Use lower case rather than upper case as the former is easier to read. Judicious use of tables can allow you to present a large amount of data within a short period of time, but do not over complicate slides. Try to anticipate potential questions from the audience and prepare answers to these in advance. Other tips on how to give a good oral

presentation have been published by Tjio et al (2013).

If you embed movies into your presentation, always check that they run properly on the day. Save your slides as an older version of PowerPoint as the conference computer may not recognize newer versions of the software. Some conferences ask you to email your slides to them beforehand. In any case, bring along a USB stick with your presentation to allow transfer of your slides to the computer running the slide show on the day. As a backup, email a copy of the slides to yourself in case you lose the USB stick.

### At the conference

Look at the programme in advance – these will be available for download several weeks before the conference starts. Identify which sessions you would like to attend. The rest of the time can be used for socializing, networking or exploring the conference city. Make a list of people you would like to catch up with or meet and take this opportunity to seek out new research collaborations or information about fellowships from senior trainees. Take time to also talk to company representatives for valuable contacts, information and courses they may provide. If you are lucky, they may sponsor an evening meal out. Some companies also provide free wifi with passwords at the conference. Also, look out for any pre-conference courses, such as the ones run by the Association of Surgeons in Training. These require a small additional fee and pre-booking is essential.

### Conclusions

Early planning is essential for best availability and to minimize the costs of travel and accommodation options. All that remains is to sit back, relax and enjoy your time at the conference. **BJHM**

*Conflict of interest: none.*

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## KEY POINTS

- Early preparation is the key to maximizing the use of your study budget.
- Use the internet to help research travel options, prices and hotel choice.
- Pack light, pre-order foreign currency and keep hold of all receipts.
- Investigate other sources of funding from your hospital, university, deanery, research society or charities.
- Examine the conference programme in advance and plan your day accordingly.