

International Science Meetings

Progress in science depends heavily on the worldwide exchange of ideas, information, data, materials, and people. Although the Internet has accelerated information exchange and created virtual scientific communities, personal interactions at international scientific meetings are vital for the development and communication of scientific knowledge. In a world of increasing military, political, and religious conflict, how should scientists and international scientific organizations decide where to hold their meetings and whom to invite? Should scientists and their representative bodies boycott certain countries?

Personal conscience will direct the decisions of individual scientists about which meetings to attend. But independent scientific organizations and meeting organizers are in a different situation: They should ground their decisions on principles accepted by the scientific community. The Principle of the Universality of Science, articulated in the International Council for Science's Statute 5 (see www.icsu.org), provides relevant guidance. The essential elements of the principle are nondiscrimination and equity: All scientists should have the possibility of participating without discrimination and on an equitable basis in legitimate scientific activities, including attendance at international meetings.

In practice, the Principle of Universality means that any country is a legitimate host if it is willing to host scientific meetings at which scientists from all other countries are considered without discrimination as possible attendees. Conversely, a country that denies access (normally by refusing to grant entry visas) to scientists from other countries should be considered an unsuitable host. Naturally, other factors such as legitimate concerns for personal security might affect the selection of a meeting venue. What is essential is that those making the choice do so without discriminating on the basis of such factors as politics, ethnicity, or religion.

One topic has caused particular angst both for individual scientists and for scientific organizations in selecting meeting venues. It is the record of the proposed host country with respect to human rights. If freedom of expression is suppressed, or if universally accepted rights are denied to some on grounds such as gender, should scientists attend such a meeting? For the individual attendee, that's a challenge to personal conscience. But the Principle of Universality would argue that a government's disrespect for human rights alone is not a valid reason for refusing to consider that country as a meeting venue. If such a nation were willing to hold an international scientific meeting equitably, scientific organizations and scientists should be willing to consider attending. Indeed, such meetings may provide occasions to demonstrate solidarity with otherwise isolated national scientific communities. It would be naïve to ignore the possibility that a political regime might use the hosting of an international scientific meeting to confer legitimacy on its other policies, including restrictions on human rights. Even under those circumstances, however, scientists are often able to communicate in ways that help refute such attempts at distortion.

It is worth noting that this principle is consistent with other rules we apply in science. Two years ago, a group of investigators refused to send special materials used in a published paper to scientists from another nation, on the grounds that they had strong objections to the policies of the nation from which the requesting scientists came. Because the refusal violated standard journal policies governing the sharing of data and materials, the journal required that the materials be sent.

In an increasingly complex world, adherence to the Principle of Universality is critical if the international scientific community wants to continue to meet and exchange freely. To start picking and choosing countries as meeting hosts on the basis of politically dictated factors, including the important issue of human rights, is to step onto a slippery slope. In truly exceptional circumstances, such a step could be justified. If so, however, the decision-makers would need to be confident that they themselves were not being discriminatory or inequitable, and that the potential benefit to society clearly outweighed the costs imposed by the restrictions. By actively supporting universality, the international scientific community could by its own example help ameliorate the discriminatory policies and practices that regrettably do exist in many countries.

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