University of Otago – Business Air Travel and Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Frequently Asked Questions
Version 1.0 June 2022

Background

In 2019 the University of Otago established the Air Travel Project, with the objectives of:

- Halving emissions from business air travel
- Offsetting the remaining emissions.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on air travel behaviours and the adoption of online tools has been significant. A round of stakeholder engagement (workshops and all-staff survey) took place in late 2020.

In April 2022, with border restrictions beginning to ease, members of the University's Senior Leadership Team (SLT) emailed their staff regarding business air travel and the target to keep annual emissions below 5,500 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (tCO2-e). Staff were invited to take part in three Zoom sessions in April, or to provide questions or feedback via email to netcarbonzero@otago.ac.nz.

This FAQ document seeks to capture key topics covered over this round of engagement. The majority of participants were academics, thus there are many questions specific to their context, but non-academic staff are also covered by this project, and we acknowledge the different drivers they may have for air travel. The Sustainability Office will work with service divisions to ensure they receive the support they need to minimise business air travel emissions.

This FAQ will be updated and amended over time. If you have a question that is not addressed, please email netcarbonzero@otago.ac.nz.

Theme 1: Internal vs External funded travel

Q. When you say business air travel, does this include externally funded travel by University staff?

A. Our 5,500tCO2-e per annum target relates to the "Business Travel – Air Travel" category in the University's Greenhouse Gas Inventory. This category comprises data from two sources:

- Flight data from our Travel Management Companies (travel agents) – whether the funding comes from an internal University budget or external funding, if the travel is made through the University process, it will be captured in this data and thus our emissions reporting.
  - While staff make up the majority of travellers, this also captures flights by students and external parties for which the University has arranged and funded their travel.
  - Any personal travel by staff or family members booked through the University travel agents is excluded from this data.
- Financial data for staff reimbursements for air travel or flights paid for using University purchase cards. This represents a small percentage of overall travel.

If another agency funds and books your travel this will not get captured in our data. Given the funding/booking agency has more operational control that the University in this instance, it is appropriate that they account for your travel as part of their greenhouse gas reporting. We have discussed this matter with the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, as a large domestic funder of research, and they agree with this position. Through the Carbon Neutral Government Programme, we expect consistency to increase across all government funding over the coming years. International funding bodies may have different approaches.

Q. How much of our air travel is internally funded versus externally funded?

A. According to our Finance system, the average percentage of the University's business air travel that was externally funded between 2015-2019 was 22%. This proportion increased in 2020 and 2021 to around 33%, noting that all travel dropped dramatically (>80%) due to the pandemic.

Theme 2: Financial incentives

Q. Are we doing this because it saves money?

A. Less flying does save us money. Even without the environmental imperative, the challenging financial situation due to the impact of the pandemic means savings were required across the board. If and when the financial situation improves, our emissions targets will remain, and therefore the conversation will be around where to invest to further deliver on our strategic imperatives without increasing emissions.

Q. While it appears this has been tied to financial savings, won't achieving the same outcomes with less flying is likely to need more budget to start with?

A. There may be additional costs in some instances. For example, running a hybrid event rather than an in-person one can be more expensive as you still have the costs of the in-person event, with the added costs of the online version. This can mean attending a conference, even the online version, can be more expensive than in previous years.

There will need to be continued investment in IT facilities and events capabilities if we're to take full advantage of the affordances of online modes. If you have suggestions for enhancements that will make online a viable alternative to in-person events in your context, please email netcarbonzero@otago.ac.nz.

Theme 3: Financial Accounting vs Carbon Accounting

Q. How are we actually going to implement new levels of air travel and stick within the emissions ceiling when we only have financial controls? Why aren't we also getting carbon budgets?

A. The Air Travel Project acknowledges that financial controls alone will not be sufficient to keep emissions below the 5,500tCO2-e per annum ceiling. At least two additional elements will be important:

> **a) culture change** – travellers, travel bookers, travel approvers and others involved in budget setting and monitoring all have a role to play in ensuring our limited pool of air travel is used in ways that support equity and maximise impact across professional/career, departmental

and University perspectives. This starts with understanding the impact of air travel on climate change and ways to reduce this. With border restrictions easing, the University's Senior Leadership Team agreed that it was important to communicate with all staff about the environmental impact of travel and greenhouse gas emissions targets in April 2022.

b) greenhouse gas emissions reporting – only reporting on air travel emissions annually, at the University-level, is not particularly helpful for teams and individuals who want to make sure they are doing their fair share. We are working on ways to support more timely and granular carbon reporting. This could also support setting "carbon" budgets, alongside financial budgets. We will be trialling a few different approaches with a small number of teams in 2022.

While we work on improving reporting, there are a range of tools that are available that individuals and teams can use to determine the emissions of different travel modes (such as Toitu's online travel calculator) and examples of approaches used in other contexts. The Sustainability Office will provide links to helpful resources on the "Business Air Travel and Greenhouse Gas Emissions" page on the University's website.

Q. Does this mean we will be tracking this through a budget as in a dollar amount?

A. Initially, we will use financial spend and quarterly flight data from our travel management companies to track total emissions. Teams and departments will need to manage the financial budget and be mindful of the emissions impact of different travel decisions.

For example, an economy seat on the same flight might costs different amounts based on when tickets are booked. We acknowledge that prudent financial management decisions, such as always booking lowest priced seats, may allow for more travel and thus more emissions from the available budget.

The best way to keep emissions down is to avoid non-essential air travel. This includes events that can be attended online instead of in-person, or activities that can be deferred until there are multiple activities/events that can be attended on the ground.

For essential air travel, it is a matter of optimising with respect to financial cost, emissions, and functionality (e.g., the efficiency of the itinerary, allowance for rest and recovery) considerations.

Q. Whether you buy an economy ticket rather than business class, isn't it all the same amount of emissions because it is all from the same plane?

A. The class of flight booked actually does make a difference in terms of emissions. Due to the size of seat and increased levels of service in business and first class, these passengers are responsible for a larger share of the emissions of that flight. You can read more about how air travel emissions are calculated in the Ministry for the Environment's guide.

Theme 4: Collective Budgets vs Individual Budgets

Q. Will travel be allocated on a department basis or through individual budgets?

A. The University is not imposing a single process on how to allocate travel within a division, department, or team, beyond the standard process of allocating financial budgets, because of the range of different factors across different areas. While dividing an available budget (be it financial, emissions or something else) up evenly and allocating this to individual staff ensures equity of inputs, it may not support equity of outcomes, given not all travel will have the same level of impact and not all staff are at the same stage of their careers.

Q. Having this limited budget may create an unhealthy competitive environment between staff when applying for international travel for conferences. Would it not be better to implement an individual budget to avoid this?

A. We do need different approaches and attitudes to travel compared to before the pandemic. We must all view business travel as a limited resource that can provide positive impacts not just to the traveller and their immediate collaborators, but their department and the University.

Collective decision making and ownership of travel decisions is likely to achieve better outcomes than arbitrary allocations and individualised decision making.

Teams are encouraged to adopt processes that work best within their context and the Sustainability Office is available to help discuss possible approaches.

Q. Each department is very different in terms of how much they need to travel, so will budgets be allocated on a department-by-department basis?

A. Financial budgets have been allocated across academic and service divisions based on their different travel needs.

The current level of financial budgets has been agreed by the Senior Leadership Team and was informed by pre-pandemic proportions of travel budgets.

Theme 5: Equity

Q. How are we going to decide who can go to conferences and who can't?

A. This decision is best made at the team/department level, due to the range of factors that will vary across the University.

Q. Who is ultimately in charge of making these decisions?

A. In May 2022, the SLT agreed to remove the additional approval steps that were introduced as a response to COVID-19 (see here). For domestic travel this means approval sits with the relevant cost centre manager, and international travel is approved by your SLT member.

While Heads of Department and SLT members play a key "gate-keeper" role in ensuring travel budgets and emissions are used effectively, a collective, proactive approach to determining how the

precious resource of travel is allocated is likely to yield better outcomes in terms of equity and impact. Please contact the Net Carbon Zero programme if your team would like to discuss how this could take place in your context (netcarbonzero@otago.ac.nz).

Q. Will an ethical/equity framework be developed to guide these new policies and decision-making?

A. Teams should be guided by existing frameworks, including the Equity and Diversity strategic framework, Māori Strategic Framework and Pacific Strategic Framework. The Net Carbon Zero programme is working on material (examples from other institutions, key principles) to support teams to develop a travel allocation and approval process that works in your specific context. If you'd like further support, please email netcarbonzero@otago.ac.nz.

Theme 6: Responsibility of the individual

Q. Each staff member will have a different carbon footprint when travelling overseas for work. Will we be trusting staff to do the right thing overseas in terms of being responsible with their travel during a 6-week trip for example?

A. Yes. As part of minimising air travel emissions, the University encourages more trip chaining (doing more than one thing while away from your regular campus). Longer trips away may involve a variety of micro-journeys where travellers should continue to consider emissions, cost, safety, and impact.

Q. Will there be workshops for people who are writing research grant applications on how to think responsibly about how much travel you should do, how to reduce, and how to write about this in applications?

A. The Research and Enterprise Division will work with the Sustainability Office to ensure staff receive the support they need to consider greenhouse gas emissions in their research grant applications.

Theme 7: How Otago will remain as an internationally recognised University

Q. I am concerned over the effect that this may have on the attractiveness of the University. We are known for recruiting staff internationally. These new policies may result in potential international employees choosing to not work for Otago, as this would restrict them in being able to return to visit their family. On the other hand, it may just cause international staff to book flights home out of their own pocket, which doesn't eradiate the flight. How will we ensure international employees are supported and maintained?

A. The Air Travel Project believes our current position with respect to air travel, and the pursuit of net carbon zero by 2030, strikes the appropriate balance between the various strategic imperatives and core values of the University of Otago.

Otago does have a high proportion of staff who come from overseas. We acknowledge that business travel can also provide opportunities to connect with family, and this can be part of what helps staff maintain job satisfaction.

However, in both personal and work domains, the impact of aviation emissions on the climate is significant and we cannot in good conscience go back to the level of air travel that was customary before the pandemic. There will still be opportunities for air travel, though for many overseas trips will be less frequent.

This context is not unique to Otago. All universities in Australasia are grappling with this challenge, as are many around the globe. It is important that we show leadership with respect to the impact of our operations on climate change and manage our expenditure wisely.

Q. I am very supportive of these new policies, but my concern is that due to our geographical location as a university and our aspiration to excel internationally in terms of ranking, how can we balance this act of achieving international standard whilst limiting our connection with internationally recognised people?

A. Air travel will still be a tool in our toolkit, especially when it delivers strong positive impacts for individuals (career development) and enhancing/maintaining the University's reputation. By using this limited air travel resource wisely and employing other tools such as online videoconferencing, we are seeking to get the balance right between our outcomes and our impact on the environment.

Q. If these policies have a negative effect on international staff recruitment rates, what effect will this have on being an internationally recognised university?

A. The Air Travel Project believes the current position is consistent with 'Vision 2040' – further engagement on this strategy will take place in 2022.

Q. If we are really going to maintain a high-quality status as a university at the end of the world, then some of those investments in innovation for conferences will need to be significant. Have we considered how we as an intuition could leverage our end-of-the-world status by being innovative in this online conference space?

A. This feedback came through strongly and we're looking into ways to support innovative online offerings, including sharing experiences of those who've tried different platforms, funding, and technical support.

Q. Will these new policies have an effect on whether we ever host a conference again in New Zealand?

A. All decisions about hosting events need to factor the impact on the climate into decision making. There will be some cases where in-person events make sense, particularly if an international conference employs the 'regional hub' approach. This is still an emerging practice, and we all have a role in ensuring conferences learn lessons from other events and continually strive to improve

participant experience (including supporting a greater diversity of participants) while minimising environmental impacts.

Theme 8: Concerns over career prospects & conferences

Q. As we as researchers grow in our careers, we need to interact with people, while we can do this virtually via zoom etc, I still think it is important to meet in person for some conferences. How will research staff be supported in this?

A. Air travel will still be part of how we operate, but the emissions target and financial budgets reflect the fact we cannot travel as much as we did pre-pandemic. There are many ways to maximise the impact of air travel when you do get the opportunity, such as longer stays that achieve multiple objectives and/or allow for deeper connections to be forged.

Q. I have a conference in the Northern Hemisphere that I haven't been able to attend in the last two years due to COVID-19 travel restrictions. It is now back in-person and if I do not go, I feel as though I will be missing out. Would I be able to attend this conference with these new policies?

A. This will depend on circumstances specific to you and your team.

Q. When I am online, I only have 1 hour to engage in the conference, and comparatively when I attend a conference in person overseas, I am able to interact for days or weeks. How will we make up for this loss in interaction?

A. This is something conference organisers around the globe are grappling with. It's important to remember how rapid the transition to online-only events was in 2020, and there is still room for innovation and improvement in the way online events are designed and the tools that are used to deliver the experience.

One thing you can do is challenge conference organisers to offer high quality online experiences that allow time for networking and social elements.

In addition, you are able to take conference leave when attending online conferences, which can free you up from other commitments to engage more deeply with conference events and deal with different time zones.

Q. There is a lot of pent-up demand for travel due to being closed off to travel from COVID-19, will you be acknowledging that many people will be wanting to travel due to this pent-up demand and unspent travel funding?

A. Yes, the Air Travel Project acknowledges many may feel this way. Equally, we only have a limited amount of greenhouse gases we can put into the atmosphere before the impact of climate change becomes catastrophic.

The pent-up demand for travel suggests that the opportunity for trip-chaining (one return air journey with many activities on the ground) will be high. Those staff who do get to travel over the next 18 months should also consider if they can do anything to benefit colleagues while away, such as identify potential collaborators.

Q. Have Māori and Pacific female researchers in their early stages of their careers been a part of this discussion to share their opinions and views?

A. Yes. The previous round of engagement in late 2020 emphasised the importance of air travel for early career academics, and the fact air travel had not historically been allocated equitably, or in terms of where it would have the biggest impact. The "drop-in" nature of the April 2022 engagement did mean limited participation by Māori and Pacific female researchers. The Sustainability Office is working on a document about air travel that includes profiles of staff and teams, which will include a range of voices and perspectives, including Māori and Pacific wahine.

Q. Living at the bottom of the world in New Zealand, I am at a disadvantage compared to my colleagues in USA and UK, will these new policies have a negative effect on my career?

A. This will depend on individual circumstances. In most cases, you should be able to continue to be successful while travelling less and travelling smarter. Travelling less can mean less time in transit and away from family. Many staff find work travel tiring and disruptive. The University's approach to air travel reflects that it is a valued commodity and has negative environmental impacts.

Q. Many internationally conferences are going back to in-person format, and I have wanted to attend one, however they do not support hybrid or online format, what should I do and how will I be supported?

A. Firstly, let the conference organisers know that you would prefer an online option. You will not be alone, and this feedback is helpful in influencing planning committees for subsequent events.

As part of this, it can help to provide examples of events that have successfully used online and hybrid modes. For examples, refer to the business air travel page on our website.

If you have attended a conference that used online and hybrid modes successfully, particularly in relation to social and networking aspects, please email netcarbonzero@otago.ac.nz.

Where there is no alternative to in-person attendance and you believe attendance will deliver significant benefits, the travel needs to be approved through the usual process.

Theme 9: Investment into online conferencing innovation

Q. How will we transform from a "frequent flyer" university to a "flying by exception" university? Will we be putting in a lot of resources to support staff to take full advantage of online/hybrid formats, and demonstrate leadership in this space?

A. As part of the Air Travel Project, the uneven distribution of IT facilities that can support multiple people on campus to participate together in online events was identified. A range of other barriers to delivering or participating in high quality online or hybrid events have been raised during engagement and the Project is working through these.

If you have a particularly good (or particularly bad) experience with an online or hybrid event, please share your insights with netcarbonzero@otago.ac.nz. This will help build up resources to support others and inform a programme of work to enhance our capability to be leaders in this space.

Q. There's a lot of senior people at university that used to travel domestically multiple times a week, this must have accounted for a substantial amount of the travel?

A. The pandemic and greater familiarity with videoconferencing has certainly demonstrated that many domestic flights can be avoided, which also can deliver time savings and greater productivity. There will still be some instances where domestic travel is required, and ideally staff will stack these activities that might have previously involved multiple return journeys into a single trip.

Theme 10: Investment into alternative modes of transport

Q. Will the university be advocating for improved intercity rail to ensure other modes of transport are improved?

A. The University will engage with central and local governments and the transportation industry to hasten the decarbonisation of travel, including increasing passenger rail options, the use of sustainable aviation fuel and electric planes, and other technological innovations that may arise. If there are any students or researchers interested in investigating what the costs and benefits would be for enhanced intercity passenger rail, the Net Carbon Zero programme may be able to provide support.

For now, we need to keep our air travel in check while the aviation industry continues to be a large contributor to greenhouse gases.

Q. Policies like these ones have been successful over in Europe because air travel can be replaced by rail at scale, has this limitation for New Zealand been considered?

A. Yes. The University acknowledges that air travel can be the only option in some cases, and the target level of emissions reflects an increase from the historic lows in 2020 and 2021. This is also why we cannot adopt other university's policies wholesale, but we will share international examples on the business air travel webpage as these can provide ideas that may be able to be adapted to our circumstances.

Theme 11: Reducing other emission categories

Q. I see lots of ambition in air travel emission reductions. Are we being ambitious enough in these other areas such as emissions from food, buildings, and energy too?

A. The SLT and University Council have agreed to emissions reduction targets across all aspects of the University's greenhouse gas emissions as currently reported. You can find more about these other emissions, the reduction targets, and key actions in "Net Carbon Zero: Journey to 2030" on our website.

Q. Are we focusing too much on reducing air travel emissions?

A. No. We are targeting all available emissions reductions. The impact of unchecked climate change is such that we can't leave any aspect of greenhouse gas emissions unchecked. Unlike most other categories, our emissions target for business air travel will allow it to increase from 2020/21 levels, though the aim is to keep it below half of pre-pandemic levels.

Q. Doesn't international student air travel emit more than staff travel all together?

A. We also measure emissions from student air travel in our greenhouse gas emissions inventory (see our 2020 inventory). In 2019, emissions from student air travel (domestic and international students) and business air travel were roughly equivalent. In 2020 and 2021, student air travel was a larger proportion of our inventory as the pandemic suppressed business travel, but we're forecasting both student and business air travel to be around a quarter of our emissions in 2030.

The Net Carbon Zero Programme is working with OUSA to co-design an approach to improve data and reporting for student air travel and develop initiatives to reduce gross and net emissions from student air travel.

Theme 12: Offsetting

Q. Should we be looking at offsetting rather than lowering staff travel?

A. The science is clear that emissions need to reduce by around half by 2030 and hit net zero by 2050 (if not sooner). If everyone resorts to offsetting first, there simply isn't enough land to support the forests we'd need, and future generations would have an even tougher task of reining in emissions and climate change. As such, emissions reduction needs to be priority one and offsetting is reserved for hard to abate emissions.

In our context, the Carbon Neutral Government Programme, which requires participating agencies to reduce emissions by at least 46% over this decade, includes business air travel as a key category.

With this said, if we are able to keep our air travel emissions below 5,500tCO2-e, this represents a 56% reduction from our 2019 base-year, and does allow us to consider offsetting these remaining emissions.

The Air Travel Project investigated a range of offsetting options, from purchasing carbon credits from various carbon exchanges to establishing our own projects that sequester carbon and generate credits than can be "cancelled" to offset our air travel emissions.

We are currently negotiating the details of our first native forest regeneration/carbon sequestration project with other partners and will make an announcement once this has been finalised.

Q: Should we be purchasing offsets for our flights in the interim while the University sorts out a centralised process for this?

A. If you're considering offsetting your flights (individually or as a team), it's worth discussing this with the Net Carbon Zero programme (netcarbonzero@otago.ac.nz) to make sure the offsetting approach is reliable and we can reflect these offsets in University reporting.

Theme 13: How to continue to contribute to this discussion

Q. Is this going to be an ongoing conversation?

A. Yes. This round of engagement in April/May 2022 follows engagement in late 2020. If the last two years have taught us anything, it's that our operating context can change rapidly. Our short-term plan is to continually update guidance and resources that are available online and work with teams who need support to create processes that work in their contexts. Ad hoc enquiries can be made via netcarbonzero@otago.ac.nz. We'll look to hold more in-person/online hui when we have data on our 2022 emissions and lessons from efforts this year to include emissions into our travel decision making processes – but

Q. Are we supposed to have seen a document or contextual draft to comment on? Am I missing a policy document that I am meant to be commenting on?

A. In May the SLT approved revisions to the travel approval and booking process (reversion to pre-pandemic process), and minor amendments are being made to travel-related policies to ensure the environmental impact of greenhouse gas emissions are considered and barriers to alternatives to flying are removed.

Due to the range of different contexts across the university, it is not possible to develop a single air travel policy decision making framework that sufficiently reflects the impact of different kinds of travel. Instead, this is best achieved through at the team/department/school level, through an open and collaborative process. If you'd like support with this, please contact netcarbonzero@otago.ac.nz.