

Sustainable Conference Organizing: Practices and Impact

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1. Introduction

Universities constitute the most mobile workforce in the Global North (Cohen et al. 2020), with international mobility is entrenched across different academic communities (Hefernan/Jöns 2013; Jonkers/Cruz-Castro 2013). For students, mobility is an invaluable means to learn about the world as well as an asset that improves hiring prospects, as many employers value the “international experience” of exchanges, international degrees, or internships. For PhD students and early career scholars, mobility fosters a strong international research network and visibility. For senior scholars, mobility is the basis for international co-publications, joint research grants and executive education opportunities. This mobility, however, comes at a price. Scholars have not only criticized the negative environmental impact of excessive mobility (e.g. Gill 2020), but have also pointed out the negative physiological, psychological, emotional and social effects of hypermobility (e.g. Cohen/Gossling 2015). Yet others highlight issues of inequality, accessibility and, ultimately, scientific knowledge production (Parker/Weik 2014).

Academic conferences in particular are an egregious source of university carbon emissions (Rosen 2017; Wynes et al. 2019) made starkly visible since universities have started full-fledged carbon emissions accounting (e.g. University of British Columbia, ETH Zürich). For the University of British Columbia, for instance, Wynes and Donner (2018) calculated that air travel was responsible for 63-73% of campus emissions. Climate scientists have problematized academic conference travel for many years. The Tyndall Centre (2015), for instance, published a strategy “towards a culture of low-carbon research for the 21st Century” that included a decision tree for identifying low-carbon travel alternatives for conferences and workshops. One of the main reasons advanced for reducing academic air travel is also the understanding that academia has an implicit prefigurative mission towards society and should pioneer sustainable practices given that air travel – including radiative forcing, i.e. the effect of clouds – now accounts for more than five percent of cumulative yearly emissions (Jungbluth et al. 2018). Outside of the climate science community, however, the pervasive belief is that academic exchange, networking, knowledge exchange and the creation of new collaborative ties is best done face-to-face (e.g. Chai/Freeman 2019).

In response, we formed a group called Organization Scientists for Future (OS4future) through an initial pledge to travel to the 2019 EGOS (European Group of Organization Studies) conference in Edinburgh by train, coach, bike or other low-carbon alternatives to flying (OS4future 2019). Since COVID-19, debates about holding academic conferences in person have halted. Faced with the alternative of missing organized academic exchange, scholars

from different disciplines and communities have readily embraced virtual conference formats. We ourselves have been organizers and participants of many such events in 2020. In this chapter, we will share our practical experiences and ideas for sustainable forms of conference organizing.

2. Sustainable Conference Organizing: Possibilities and Reflections

Given extant debates, sustainable conference organizing needs to address two points in particular: reduce carbon emissions and waste, and ensuring inclusiveness of scholars that, for various reasons ranging from budgetary constraints or geographical locations to care duties or disabilities, are less mobile than others. In the past, there have been some notable efforts to make conferences in *face-to-face* settings more sustainable.

One measure is to make the *venue itself* “carbon neutral”, e.g. by reducing plastics, turning off air conditioning, or providing only vegan food. For instance, the European Group for Organizational Studies (EGOS) 2020 organizing team in Hamburg was proactive about preventing carbon emissions from its conference-related activities. They had planned to offer vegetarian meals, provide reusable materials and water bottles and refill stations, while refraining from providing printed programs and “goodie bags” – hence sending consumption-oriented signals to conference participants that might have longer-term effects beyond the conference itself. Regarding food specifically, the 2017 EGOS Colloquium in Copenhagen pioneered offering only vegan food. Although not all attendees enjoyed the choice and some complained or even boycotted the conference lunches by visiting a steakhouse, vegan food is the best option in terms of reducing carbon emissions considering that even a conventional vegan diet has a far lower carbon footprint than an organic and local vegetarian one (not to mention the omnivorous diet) (Tilman/Clark 2014; Willett et al. 2019). Another advantage of vegan food in multicultural and multireligious encounters is that this diet is consistent with most religions, as well as non-religious preferences – omnivores, moreover, are not restricted to eat meat. Two criticisms are brought against this policy: it would undermine individual freedom in dietary choices and prevent organizers from displaying local culinary traditions. Both criticisms seem unfounded. With respect to the first, as we take the EGOS example, during the three days of the conference food is served at three lunches and at the formal EGOS dinner. This means that up to four of the nine main meals in three days out of 365 of a year, attendees would be ‘obliged’ to eat vegan food. At breakfast and dinner, they can choose to eat whatever they want. Moreover, in most cultures, guests are considered impolite if they complain about the food they are served. To the second, there are many dimensions of culture and arts beyond food that local organizers can highlight. And lots of traditional foods are plant-based. A less drastic choice (that has been pioneered by the 2014 Austrian Early Scholars Workshop in Management in Linz) is to nudge attendees: they were required to indicate special dietary requirements given that the default option was vegan/vegetarian and they had to explicitly say if they preferred fish instead: only a few did.

Another option has been *carbon offsetting*: For instance, the ONE Division of the Academy of Management (AoM) calculated all travel-related carbon emissions from its members and offset them in 2019. But carbon offsetting should only be seen as a last resort solution as it may even have a counterproductive effect (Anderson 2012).

A bigger issue, thus, is *reducing air travel* to conferences. EGOS Hamburg provided a public transport ticket for all participants and negotiated discount deals with the German

state-owned railway company so as to provide incentives for train travel. Before the conference moved online, the conference website provided comprehensive information explaining and incentivizing train travel options, even if just to avoid a second flight for those traveling from outside Europe. In this effort, they were supported by our OS4future #E-GOSbyTrain initiative, in which we offered an on-train paper development workshop and coordinated group trips in advance from different central train stations. OS4future has supported a similar #AoMbyTrain initiative. Of course, there are geographic limitations to reducing travel to face-to-face conferences, since train travel options are not always widely available, especially outside of Western Europe and in more remote locations. Conference organizers face difficult choices of whether to privilege central locations which can be relatively easily reached by train, or opt for peripheral regions, which will benefit economically from the inflow of visitors and increase their visibility. Clearly, train travel options are limited within North American locations, which often span huge distances, and are not available for intercontinental visits (at least, on a regular basis; but see Anderson's (2014) report on his visit by train to Shanghai from the UK or Gianluca Grimalda's (2020) blog on his conference visit to Tokyo from Germany).

Flight	(kg CO ₂ / traveler / return flight)			
	New aircraft Business	New aircraft Economy	Old aircraft Business	Old aircraft Economy
Frankfurt-San Francisco	4 909	1 693	6 996	2 412
New York-Chicago	553	369	684	456
Shanghai - Los Angeles	4 323	1 491	6 203	2 139
Paris - Johannesburg	4 778	1 647	6 809	2 348

Hotel	(kg CO ₂ / traveler / room night)	
	Luxury Property	Midscale Property
Germany	66,3	24,4
France	18,2	6,7
United States	54,9	20,2
China	90,1	33,1

Figure 1: Travel-related emissions calculations (Advito 2020)

One solution to this dilemma is to provide *hybrid* models, which allow colleagues to participate virtually, or *multi-site models*, in which several decentralized events take place simultaneously face-to-face, but are virtually interconnected (Coroama et al. 2012). A further and complementary solution is for individuals to *re-think their event calendar*. Many of us avoid flying to distant conferences or visit them rarely and in combination with longer research visits (Delmestri et al. forthcoming).

The most radical form of making conferences more sustainable is to make them *virtual*. Virtual conferences do still have emissions related to server use, but they eliminate the far higher emissions related to travel. For example, a Frankfurt-San Francisco return flight emits

1.7 tons of CO₂ (private communication by Advito Travel Consulting, see Figure 1) which is more than many average citizens consume in a year in the Global South.

Virtual formats, by reducing travel time, allow for more time with the family and increase inclusiveness in various ways (Bergström Casinowsky 2013). As already discussed by Parker and Weik (2014), international mobility among academics is a privilege of those without care duties and those with large research budgets. In a blogpost, PhD candidate Alena Sander (2020) writes that

“not all scientists are equally mobile. Studies show that one group of researchers in particular are less mobile than others: namely women who are also mothers. (...) Their relative immobility adds to the reasons why women researchers with children are disadvantaged when it comes to reaching leading scientific positions at universities and research institutions”.

Likewise, researchers with physical impairments experience severe accessibility problems at traditional conferences. As de Picker (2020) writes:

“I also was astonished that video interaction is so little used at academic conferences compared to other educational settings or the business world. It is a missed opportunity to let persons participate for whom it is difficult to travel or attend an entire conference (...).”

As we mention above, a common critique of virtual conferences is that they do not offer the same experience as face-to-face ones. Common views hold that while they may be good for discussing focused topics, they are much less suited for facilitating informal interactions and social bonds. Research on virtual teams or virtual forms of co-presence is increasingly skeptical of this black-and-white view, however (e.g. Grabher et al. 2018). Bonds can form in virtual settings, too, but of course, they require organizing efforts. There are also many practical questions regarding time zones, the technology infrastructure and support, maintaining attention and a “conference spirit”. In the next section, we offer some practice examples of virtual conferences we organized or participated in and discuss participants’ reactions and feedback to them.

3. Practice Examples

The first larger virtual conference one of us co-organized was the 2020 Organization Studies Summer Workshop, originally scheduled to take place in Greece. There was little time to prepare the virtual model and there were no resources, since organizers decided to waive fees in an effort to reduce entry barriers. The technology – Zoom – was hosted by Penn State University, where one of the organizers was based. The workshop had about 100 participants from around the world, and the organizing team took several steps to make sure everyone who wanted to participate could do so (Zietsma et al. 2020). These included reducing synchronous time by pre-recording presentations and shortening sessions; asking discussants to prepare comments and “break the ice” during sessions; preparing well as session hosts to stimulate discussions if needed; spreading sessions across the hours that worked for most participants’ time zones, but ensuring there were at least some sessions for those outside the main time corridor; and scheduling the two keynote speeches in time slots that worked for the majority of participants. To enable informal exchange, the organizers left session rooms open for informal interaction after each session had ended and organized social sessions in which participants were randomly assigned to breakout rooms so they could engage in small group conversations. The conference opened with such an interactive session focused on the conference theme, which set the tone for collaborative work throughout.

EGOS 2020, a much larger conference with 2000+ participants, also had to move online on relatively short notice in the light of Covid-19 restrictions. The conference team worked with a professional platform provider that provided information and training sessions as well to everyone running sessions or subthemes. The organizers set time corridors, so that sub-theme organizers could schedule their subthemes according to the needs of participants. Some were synchronous, others more asynchronous. In addition, keynotes and other speeches were pre-recorded, followed by an interactive chat discussion. The conference also featured virtual social events with breakout rooms and games to enable informal socializing. The 'symbolic' colloquium fee of EUR 10 lowered financial access barriers but would not be financially sustainable in the long run since virtual conferences also come with a cost, especially for the platform provider.

In both cases, a survey among participants was run afterwards and indicated a higher than expected satisfaction. In one EGOS subtheme, participants reported that they could get as rich feedback as in a usual face-to-face format in line with the “EGOS spirit”, which requires all participants to stay together and follow the same track for two and a half days. The quality of the discussion was high and the chat function enabled further comments and suggestions (even more than in face-to-face settings) without disturbing the overall conversation. Nevertheless, the social aspect, which is paramount for networking opportunities, could be more difficult to imitate in a purely virtual format, making hybrid and multi-site conference models viable alternatives as well.

The yearly alternation of online or multi-site and full face-to-face formats could be considered. The alternation would bring an instantaneous reduction of almost half of the carbon emissions of the conference and could allow smaller universities to take the lead alone or in cooperation to gain visibility. A network of universities could offer a hybrid multi-site format allowing for a combination of digital and face-to-face interactions (Wilde 2020). The most ambitious implementation so far has been, to our knowledge, the “semi-virtual, multi-hub, global conference” organized by Richard Parncutt at the University of Graz in 2018 across five sites. Wilde (2020) reports of a multi-site conference project as a collaboration among three US universities also including social settings through an arrangement for camera/screen locations along a wall in the reception hall and for virtual participants a virtual reality (VR) avatar-based space where they could interact leisurely.

4. Impact: Climate, Diversity and Inequality

The participants from the OS summer workshop valued three aspects of the virtual format in particular: inclusiveness, reduced environmental impact and new opportunities for interaction (for a more detailed report, see Schüßler et al. 2020).

Regarding *inclusiveness*, participants appreciated not having to travel and told us that, for budgetary or family reasons, they were only able to attend the conference because it was virtual. Unsurprisingly, this point was emphasized by scholars with younger children in our in-person, informal conversations during the conferences. At the same time, however, participants missed the opportunity of “getting away” from usual routines and family obligations. While it can be an advantage to combine conference participation with other duties and reducing time away from one’s family, missing the free mental space is clearly a disadvantage, as being relieved from usual routines can stimulate fresh thinking and inspiration. “When you are physically in a venue away from home and from work, you can easily ‘be only there’”, one of the participants responded.

Regarding *environmental impact*, “Not having to travel and pollute” was mentioned as a major benefit of the virtual format by many respondents. But what will people choose between travelling to a conference in person or attending virtually? Does such a decision not necessarily involve a trade-off between career-related goals and sustainability values? It may not: a recent study based on the emission data from UBC found no relationship between air travel emissions and metrics of academic productivity (e.g., h-index). In other words, those who fly regularly do not necessarily gain more from it in terms of research quality and output.

Regarding new *opportunities for interaction*, participants appreciated the affordances of the “breakout group” and chat functions in Zoom. The random assignment of people to breakout rooms during social hours ensured conversations among people who may not otherwise have interacted. Chat boxes for audience members and presenters can help boost confidence in answering audience questions because it gives presenters the opportunity to formulate more polished responses than they might be able to offer in-person. This is particularly valuable for non-native English speakers. Answering in writing may help (younger) researchers to fight feelings of “fear and embarrassment” about their English (Sciencemag 2020). The same argument holds for the breakout rooms: especially for those who do not have a strong existing network at the venue (and thus receive the benefits of informal/off-venue dinners, coffees, etc.) or are less confident in approaching senior scholars. One participant noted that the online format reduced the status differences between participants allowing easier participation by early scholars. Of course, these mechanisms might also work exactly the other way around depending on personality types and situations, providing arguments for mixing different modes of conferencing. Furthermore, many participants missed the more unstructured and serendipitous opportunities for informal interaction. We received the comment: “I often get the most valuable feedback after the presentation. People are less shy then and deeper discussions emerge. This was not really possible despite rooms staying open after a session”.

5. Conclusion

Our experiences indicate that while virtual conference modes cannot fully replace physical meet-ups and exchange, we have multiple opportunities for making academic conferences more sustainable—in environmental *and* inclusive terms. A key task for the future will be to imagine hybrid formats that allow for inclusiveness, travel-related emissions reduction and new interactive formats through virtual participation, while at the same time facilitating physical encounters. These models need to be combined with more conscious individual-level choices, e.g. focusing on one, really important conference to attend in person and on others that are attended virtually. Setting priorities may also encourage researchers to combine conference travel with other activities in the region (i.e., research stays, talks at several nearby locations). Of course, this has implications for research and academic exchange, but it could also be a chance to revise the values within academia towards more thoughtful, slower and inclusive scholarship.

These steps need to be supported on an institutional and systems level (Governance across Borders 2019). Universities must incentivize and support virtual conferences as much as physical ones, and they need to develop travel policies that support the primacy of low-carbon travel, also for long distances. They must provide more flexibility e.g. when it comes to organizing teaching schedules, so that faculty members can combine conference trips with research stays. For organizers of hybrid conferences, there are challenges in managing re-

gistrations. Those attending virtually may want to pay less fees than those attending in person. Those attending in person may have higher expectations and want more “value for money”. Thus, while we see particular value in hybrid models moving forward, we still more experiences when it comes to organizing such formats (for instance, EGOS 2022 in Vienna is already planning 4 to 5 hybrid sub-themes as a pilot project). Furthermore, virtual participation can be greatly enriched by new tools such as “Gather.Town”, which allows for informal interaction, and our event organizers need to begin experimenting and using such tools. Universities should provide access to these tools as well as training opportunities. Furthermore, carbon accounting tools should be readily available for conference organizers so that it is made easy for them to develop carbon-neutral formats.

In a blog piece, PhD candidate Jenna Althoff (2020) reflects on what international mobility will look like after the pandemic. Her main conclusion is to consider mobility as a privilege and a pleasure - something to be used sparingly, wisely, purposefully. This is a sentiment we echo: to move away from “fast academia” on an aeroplane towards slow, yet internationally connected forms of exchange using the occasional trip and other, virtual modes of interaction. Sustainable conferencing thus does not mean the end of conferencing and a “brave new world” of eternal video calls, but smarter conferencing marked by less flight trips, longer trips, a mix of geographical locations with virtual participation options, and a focus on meaningful and joyful connectivity and exchange in both the analogue and the virtual world.

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