Guideline: Sustainable Events

Background
Events involving external participants are regularly held at universities. These include international conferences, workshops and local events. International events especially have a considerable impact on the environment as the participants have to travel to attend. Using greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions as an example indicator for environmental impact, the following figure provides an overview of the emissions caused by a typical conference:

Communication is important to inform participants that they are attending a sustainable event and how they can do their bit. Pass on your experiences (best practices, challenges) to others.

As a general rule, the more of the following criteria are adhered to, the more sustainable the event will be. However, it is clear from the figure that we can only refer to an event as “sustainable” if at least the pollution from travel can be reduced. In contrast, doing without printed event materials for instance is a step in the right direction, yet it usually only compensates for one to ten flights.

Virtual or physical event
Cutting down on travel is the most effective measure for a sustainable event.

• **Virtual event**: The most environmentally friendly way is to hold an event virtually. The GHG emissions caused are very small in comparison [4, 5]. Moreover, it also enables researchers with a limited budget and from far and wide to attend [6]. If this is not possible, the environmental impact can be reduced by holding an event at several locations with virtual links between the venues [7, 8].

• **Physical event**: The environmental impact can be reduced considerably by selecting a central venue – taking into account the participants’ starting point [9]. The train should be recommended as the primary means of transport and the event schedule adjusted so that it is possible to travel in by (night) train from the cities from which the majority of participants are coming. Moreover, a live transmission on the Internet or a webcast should be offered and indicated in the invitation.

Accomodation
After travel, overnight stays in hotels are responsible for the largest share of GHG emissions [1]. The following aspects should be taken into consideration when choosing hotels.

• **Public transport accessibility**: Hotels near the venue, which are easy to reach by public transport or on foot, reduce the environmental pollution caused by commuting. The conference fee should include a public transport pass for the duration of the event.

• **Labels**: Recommend or reserve hotels that have independently assessed sustainability certificates. Ask your local tourist organisation for an overview of such hotels. If you have a long-standing collaboration with a hotel, ask them to what extent ecological and social aspects (e.g. accessibility) are integrated in the business.

In a nutshell: Tips for sustainable events
You can reduce the environmental impact most effectively by adopting event formats that limit travel. These include virtual events or even decentralised events at various locations which are connected virtually. If this is not possible, participants should travel to and from the event by train whenever they can. Recommend accommodation that is situated as closely to the venue as possible and stands out on account of its environmentally friendly or social commitment. During the event, you should ensure accessibility, provide a public transport pass, offer sustainable catering, avoid waste and ideally make do without printed event materials and freebies. Inform the participants that this is organised as a sustainable event and pass on your experiences to others.

Impact on the climate of a three-day conference with 800 participants [1-3]. It was assumed that this conference takes place in Central Europe and thus around 60% of the participants are still able to travel to and from it by train [1]. A higher proportion of air travel would considerably increase the GHG emissions.

On site
The following aspects should be considered on site:

- **Catering:** The Guideline Sustainable Catering describes the most important criteria for sustainable catering. These can also be applied to external restaurant recommendations [10].

- **Waste concept:** The primary goal should be to avoid waste, followed by recycling. For recycling, separate, well-labelled containers should be provided.

- **Avoiding printed event materials:** Materials should be provided electronically in advance, not printed out. Print-outs that cannot be avoided should be printed on both sides [11]. Programme information can be displayed in a central place on site. Discuss with your sponsors if they can do without (extensive) advertising brochures.

- **Avoiding carrier bags, notepads and pens:** If bags are unavoidable, those made of recycled plastic which meets the criteria of the “Blauer Engel” label are the most environmentally friendly option [12]. Cotton and nylon bags should be avoided [12-14].

- **Freebies:** When offering material freebies for participants and gifts for speakers, there is the risk that they do not need them. Symbolic gifts that constitute a donation for social or ecological projects are a sustainable alternative.

- **Accessibility:** This enables people with limited mobility or impaired vision or hearing to attend. Ask participants upon registration whether and which supportive technologies they require [15].

- **Safety and Health:** To ensure the safety of participants, follow the "UZH-Richtlinie zur Gewährleistung von Sicherheit und Gesundheit bei Veranstaltungen an der UZH".

**Notes and references**


3. Conference organisation: this includes conference administration, website and programme committee; printed materials: these include calls for papers, programme, other dispatch documents and printed materials; arrival and departure of the participants: car (6%), train (39%), short-haul flight (20%), medium-haul flight (9%), long-haul flight (6%) [1]. Venue, catering and accommodation: averages for a similarly sized event [2]. Assumed venue: 8 oomza heated area. The data from [1] – with the exception of the USB stick – is based on the values for a real conference, which were up-scaled to a larger conference of 800 people [1].


14. Cotton bags would have to be re-used around 80 times to make as low an environmental impact as a plastic bag made of over 80% recycled plastic that meets the "Blauer Engel" requirements (12).


**Further information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arrival</th>
<th>Tools to calculate the GHG emissions of the journey to the venue, are for instance Ecopassenger or mobitool.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Labels for accommodation</td>
<td>Fairunterwegs provides an overview of sustainability labels for accommodation. The Schweizer Hoteldatenbank has a list containing the filters “Green Living” and “Sustainable Living”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freebies</td>
<td>Gifts where the majority of the amount spent constitutes a donation to sustainability projects are available from Heks or Helvetas, for instance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility</td>
<td>The Fachstelle Studium und Behinderung will gladly advise you on the topic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety and Security</td>
<td>The Abteilung Sicherheit und Umwelt will gladly advise you on the topic.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Contact, ETH Zurich: www.ethz.ch/sgu
Contact and advice, UZH: www.sustainability.uzh.ch
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