

Policy principles for international travel HOGENT

Purpose

HOGENT is strongly committed to fostering international collaboration, further internationalising education and research, acquiring international and intercultural competencies, maximising learning outcomes for students, and professionalisation of staff. Physical international collaboration and exchange generate the dynamism and energy that higher education requires, but they also demand commitment and perseverance to achieve HOGENT's internationalisation objectives. At the same time, HOGENT aims to fulfil its societal responsibility by reducing its negative environmental impact, respecting human rights, and ensuring that its international programmes are broadly accessible. For these reasons, **guiding policy principles for travel** are essential.

Frame

The most effective form of travel is one where the chosen mode (virtual or physical) is as closely aligned as possible with the intended purpose of the journey.

The supervisor, who is responsible for reviewing and approving the service/study trip request, considers six steps in the decision-making process, in the following order:

- *1. Is the predetermined goal sufficiently achievable through virtual transfer? If yes, no further steps are required.*
- *2. If the predetermined goal cannot be sufficiently achieved through virtual transfer and a physical journey is deemed necessary, assess the added value, number of participants, possibilities for sustainable travel, and take into account considerations of care (where applicable)*
- *3. Can the emissions linked to the trip be justified within HOGENT's sustainability commitments?*
- *4. Are there any potential human rights violations?*
- *5. Are there any circumstances that compromise safety?*
- *6. Does every member of HOGENT have an equal opportunity to mobility (within HOGENT's possibilities)?*

1. Choose virtual mobility if possible.

There are various technical solutions available to facilitate meetings, workshops, lectures, and other forms of collaboration between individuals in different locations. HOGENT continuously invests in the necessary infrastructure, software and support. Think of hybrid teaching and meeting rooms, digital learning environments, software tools, and HELA (HOGENT Education Learning Academy).

2. Opt for international mobility only when virtual mobility does not adequately serve the intended purpose. Consider following questions for international mobility:

2.1. Is there any added value?

Any international mobility has added value to the job or study, the entity or HOGENT as an organisation. Mobility that prioritizes a strategic goal and/or combines multiple goals¹ is preferred.

2.2. Can the number of participants be limited?

Where applicable and feasible, the number of participating staff or students should be limited.

2.3. Can the travel be organized as sustainably as possible?

All international trips organised by HOGENT staff or students must be planned in the most sustainable way possible. In other words, sustainable options must always be considered. Certain external funding channels for student and staff mobility explicitly require this.

We distinguish 3 scenarios of mobility, each requiring a different follow-up:

- *Scenario 1: Sustainable alternatives to flying are available*
This applies to short-distance European flight destinations that can also be reached by train/bus/car in less than eight hours. For cities that can be reached from Ghent by train, bus or car in less than eight hours (door-to-door) or whose travel time by train is no longer than by plane², sustainable alternatives are preferred.
- *Scenario 2: No sustainable alternatives to flying are available*
This refers to European destinations that require more than eight hours of overland travel by train/bus/car. In such cases, alternatives to flying are impossible or practically less suitable (see also 2.4 'care'). These trips should be limited in frequency and in the number of participants. Virtual or hybrid mobility options should be fully explored to avoid unnecessary physical travel/
- *Scenario 3: No sustainable alternatives exist and travel involves high emissions.*
This applies to intercontinental air travel with significant environmental impact. In such cases, HOGENT will carefully assess whether the strategic value justifies the trip (see 2.1).

¹Combination of multiple goals is, for example, combining attendance at an event with a partner or project meeting, or giving a guest lecture

²Travel time = time you need from departure to destination; for air travel, this includes the flight itself plus two additional hours to account for travel to the airport, check-in, and transfer time

In addition to sustainable modes of transportation, HOGENT sensitizes staff and students to make sustainable choices on the ground as travellers as well.

2.4. Are care-related considerations to be considered?

Decisions regarding modes of travel are not solely based on duration and distance. Factors such as safety, comfort³, and the personal/family situation⁴ of staff and students are also considered.

3. Emissions

Air travel has a huge impact on our carbon footprint. Each entity of HOGENT shares equal responsibility and is committed to reducing emissions in line with HOGENT's sustainability policy. The 2024 baseline measurement will be used as reference point.

4. Human rights situation

HOGENT is committed to the protection and promotion of human rights and strives to minimise the risk of violations of these rights. A systematic and thorough assessment is carried out for every international mobility, examining possible human rights violations at the level of the host partner, institution, region, and/or country.

Since 2023, HOGENT has included human rights clauses in all its bilateral agreements⁵. As of 2024, these clauses are also part of cooperation agreements in the context of contracted services. If a partner or client is involved in a human rights violation, the partnership or assignment can be terminated on that basis.

5. Safety

For HOGENT, the safety of every member of HOGENT takes precedence. Therefore, the travel advice of the Belgian Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs is always followed. Three scenarios are possible:

1. No explicit travel advisory: traveling to the destination is allowed;
2. Negative travel advisory: travelling to the destination is not allowed;
3. Non-essential travel is discouraged. In this case, an in-depth risk analysis is required, supported by a roadmap. Such roadmaps are already standard practice in many higher education institutions.

Both the human rights situation and the safety context are assessed at the time of the application and shortly before departure.

³ Comfort: number of transfers, time of travel ,

⁴ Personal/family situation e.g. caregiver, single parent, facing difficulties arranging childcare, ...

⁵ Human rights clause in partnerships *'All parties pledge to uphold human rights as defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. If one of the contracting parties is involved in a serious or systematic violation of human rights, the other party can unilaterally terminate the contract after a dialogue between all involved parties has taken place, with the goal of openly discussing problems, concerns, and possible solutions while taking into account each party's context'*.

6. Inclusive traveling

HOGENT believes it is essential that as many colleagues and students as possible can acquire international and intercultural competencies. Because of ecological privileges and social inequalities, not everyone has this opportunity.

All HOGENT staff members are entitled to equal opportunities for international mobility, within the operational, financial possibilities of HOGENT.

The international offer for students (international mobility for internship or study, foreign study trips, excursions, etc.) is accessible to a broad group of students. External resources are used as widely as possible.

<p>The policy principles described above apply to both HOGENT students and staff, but also to incoming mobilities funded by HOGENT.</p>
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Addenda

Annex 1 - Positioning within existing HOGENT policy frameworks.

Internationalisation is a broad concept open to multiple interpretations. HOGENT follows the definition laid out in its 2015 Internationalisation Policy Plan⁶: '*Internationalisation is the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society.*' This definition underlines that internationalisation is a continuous process, not a goal in itself. It serves as a means to enrich and enhance the quality of our decretal missions. Key elements include the inclusive approach for students and staff, and the emphasis on a meaningful contribution to society, both of which are central to HOGENT's mission.

The *HOGENT Internationalisation Policy Plan* (BC/B/2020/ONDW/90161) articulates the ambition to further internationalise both education and research. This ambition is pursued through initiatives such as Internationalisation@home, digital and physical mobility for students and staff, and participation in (European) partnerships and projects. Three pillars guide this ambition: clearly defined roles and responsibilities in the internationalisation process, strategic selection of countries and partner institutions, and optimal use of available resources. These same principles shape the present travel policy.

In addition, *the HOGENT mobility policy* (BC/B/2024/BEAA/143873) provides an important complementary framework for 'international travel'. It focuses on the modes of travel used by students and staff in the context of internationalisation, the creation of an inclusive international offer and respect for human rights in countries and among partners we work with.

Existing *procedures for business travel* (e.g., PROC/AD/DFIT/013, PROC/AD/FIN/003 and PROC/AD/FIN/007) and *student mobility* (e.g., PROC/AD/OND/001 and budget distribution E+KA131) already describe the decentralized decision-making process and responsibilities in this matter. Sustainability is also a key parameter within this decision-making process.

⁷Business travel is, by definition, travel undertaken by staff members within their duties at the college. This does not include student mobility.

Annex 2 - Process

In December 2023, the Internationalisation Council was briefed, and agreed with, the ambition to develop a sustainable travel policy, as well as with the proposed approach for its development and broad internal support.

Early 2024, an advisory group was established, composed of representatives from all departments, the School of Arts, research centres, administrative services, and the student council. In addition to discussions within this advisory group, input was gathered from all HOGENT students and staff through a series of polls. This input, along with literature review, travel policies from other institutions, and analysis of the poll results, formed the basis for the present policy framework (April 2024).

The framework was submitted to the Internationalisation Council (May 2024) for advice and to the Executive Board (19/09/2024) for formal approval.

The operationalisation of this policy will continue in 2024-2025 through follow-up meetings with this advisory group.

Annex 3 - Operationalisation.

The concrete implementation of these policy principles will be further developed in follow-up meetings with the advisory group. This group will focus on the development and follow-up of practical tools related to monitoring, information and awareness-raising, carbon compensation, and the design and refinement of process lines to support operationalisation.

1. Monitoring

A baseline measurement of travel behaviour within HOGENT will be established for the year 2023. This baseline will serve as the foundation for setting carbon footprint reduction targets. The measurement is expected to reveal that certain entities are historically or disciplinarily more active in international engagement. Reduction targets will be determined proportionally, in alignment with the added value internationalisation brings to the entity and/or to HOGENT.

Key performance indicators (KPIs) reflecting travel behaviour will be included in the Business Intelligence (BI) system and evaluated and reported annually (in relation to strategic goals). Additionally, the impact of actions will be monitored and visualised.

2. Information and awareness-raising

Staff and students will be informed and sensitised about the sustainable travel policy (who, what, why, how). Supervisors will receive support to help them implement the sustainable travel policy.

3. Cost

CO₂ compensation is a method to offset the emissions caused by an organisation. This can be done, for example, by generating green energy, capturing CO₂ from the air, or planting trees. An organisation can implement this itself or collaborate with an external partner. In the context of air travel, for instance, several airlines already offer the option to offset emissions during the booking process by paying an additional fee. Alternatively, organisations may choose to purchase CO₂ emission certificates to meet their reduction targets in a measurable and verifiable way. HOGENT does not favour external offsetting.

Several higher education institutions already use internal CO₂ accounting systems, where each ton of CO₂ emitted is translated into a financial contribution that is reinvested internally. This contribution is used to promote sustainable travel modes, support inclusive international opportunities, facilitate virtual mobility, and/or fund internal sustainability projects. Whether such a compensation system - temporary or permanent - could be applicable to HOGENT to reinforce its sustainable travel policy will be explored during the implementation phase of the policy. The stakeholder group will also examine what the compensation rate should be and how the funds would be used. These discussions will also consider HOGENT's internationalisation objectives, as outlined in the internationalisation policy plan.

4. Process Lines

The success of this sustainable travel policy will largely depend on the development, adjustment, and integration of a number of process lines into our existing procedures. This includes, for example, travel request procedures, booking systems, and human rights and safety assessments. For this purpose, we will build on existing tools, websites, checklists, decision trees, and best practices to operationalise HOGENT's sustainable travel policy.

Resources

- HOGENT internationalisation policy plan BC/B/2020/ONDW/90161)
- Mobility policy HOGENT (BC/B/2024/BEAA/143873)
- KLM Blog: Sustainable travel and flying
- National Geographic: Sustainable travel – “Don't travel less but travel consciously”
- Easily accessible cities by train - Ghent University (ugent.be)
- Home - Travellers Online (diplomacy.com)
- Intercultural Competencies - ICOMs - International Competencies
- Exploring a small world. Motivations and obligations for academic travel in a Flemish context. Dissertation Tom Storme (2014).
- <https://www.ugent.be/nl/univgent/missie/mensenrechten/toets-samenwerkingen.htm>
 - Human Rights Watch (countries, companies and sectors)
 - Universal Human Rights Index (UHRI).
 - Business & Human Rights Resource Center (companies)
 - Norges Bank Investment Management (listed companies).
 - China Tech Map (for Chinese technology companies)
 - Scholars at Risk (academic sector)
- <https://www.veto.be/sociaal/ku-leuven-verstrengt-regels-rond-vliegreizen-voor-staff/340948>
- Information obtained from ‘sustainable business travel higher education’ meetings (colleges, universities, Bond Beter Leefmilieu)