

Tread lightly

Attending international conferences sustainably

Statistics lecturer Dr Charlotte Jones-Todd initiated a domestic hub in Raglan for a conference taking place in South Africa. She describes what the hybrid conference experience was like and highlights the reasons, beyond collectively reducing their carbon footprint, that drove her and her colleagues to participate as virtual attendees.

CONFERENCES ARE a key part of any academic career. Presenting to international audiences forges connections that initiate collaboration. These links support and strengthen researchers' careers. Yet, do we need to travel thousands of miles for a fifteen-minute talk and a few shared pints with our newly found international colleagues? As we all become increasingly aware of our carbon footprints, I hope not.

It's not just the carbon miles though; academia strives for equity. Yet, it remains that only those with funding can afford to travel to garner those all-important collaborations. A self-fulfilling prophecy it seems.

The pandemic quickly taught us how to move into a virtual world. Many of us attended conferences online, but in my case, I would do so only half-heartedly waiting for the 'real' conference scene to open back up again. However, the hybrid structure of a recent conference afforded a group of us from the Department of Statistics (including PhD students, research assistants and postdoctoral staff) the opportunity to foster collegiality and avoid the carbon cost to the environment. We attended the International Statistical Ecological Conference (ISEC) held in Cape Town, South Africa from Raglan, New Zealand.

Why? Attending virtual conferences over the last few years ended in me paying nothing but lip service to the talks, and continuing to work as usual. My colleagues all fell into the same pitfall and so we took a step away from the office and attended the conference remotely, but this time as a group. As well as clearly being the carbon-friendly option, people could easily join in who otherwise wouldn't have been able to attend. Conference fees were much reduced and the travel costs, by comparison, were negligible. Watching sessions as a group, after the morning coffee run, gave

the much-needed step away from the day-to-day. To properly engage with conference talks this dissociation is a must.

I foresee hybrid conferences becoming the norm; domestic hubs offer a carbon-friendly alternative to international travel and have many accessibility benefits. Hubs help foster collegiality and collaboration and give everyone a chance to join in. Going forward, we need to see institutions support such ventures. International conference travel is accepted as an integral part of academia; it seems remiss not to support a more accessible, carbon-friendly, and constructive alternative. In order to get a 'conference experience' from a virtual setting, we need to leave our offices!



Dr Charlotte Jones-Todd. Photo: Billy Wong

To learn more about Sustainability in the Faculty of Science visit: science.auckland.ac.nz/sustainability

"The hub approach was much better than sitting at home for the virtual conference! Especially because there were more impromptu opportunities to discuss conference talks."

David Chan, PhD student

"Being able to pause and talk to others between talks is beneficial. I also found it had perfectly balanced technology and tradition."

Dr Jing Liu

"I started my PhD in 2021, and have only attended online conferences as a PhD student. I really enjoyed watching the conferences with my peers and discussing the content. It was by far the best conference that I have attended, and I came away from it feeling refreshed and motivated to get really stuck into my research. The satellite conference was a great idea, and I'd love to attend many more in the future!"

Rishika Chopara, PhD student

"I liked the way the day was broken up into two watching sessions, with some live talks and others recorded, as there was scope to talk about the presentations. It also meant there was a nice balance between conference talks, social time, and time for getting other work done."

Rosemary Barraclough, Research Assistant

"I loved the way we were able to discuss the recorded talks with our research students as we went along, making it more enriching for all of us. It was also encouraging for the students to know they aren't the only ones who don't follow all the technical details!"

Professor Rachel Fewster