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Potentiële ondersteuning voor een duurzamer reisbeleid onder academisch personeel aan de Universiteit Leiden: KCPEG onderzoeksrapport

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“I love the train, so if it’s a practical option I would always be happy to.”

Potential Support for a More Sustainable Business Travel Policy Among Academic Staff at Leiden University

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1. Introduction

Leiden University is working hard on becoming more sustainable. Therefore, the university is considering updating its business travel policy so that academic staff members (specifically PhD candidates, post-docs, assistant professors, associate professors, and full professors) travel more sustainably in the future. The Behavioural Insights Team Universiteit Leiden (BIT UL), which is part of the Leiden University Knowledge Centre Psychology and Economic Behaviour (KCPEG), was asked by Leiden University's (LU) Sustainability Office to assess both the academic staff's willingness to engage in more sustainable business-related international travel (i.e., reduce air travel) as well as the (behavioural) factors that drive their current business-related international travel behaviour. The research questions were answered by means of an online survey that was sent to the LU academic staff. The findings of this study contribute to the broader advice on the current travel policy that the LU Sustainability Office provides to the LU Administrative Office. In this report, we summarize the main findings of the study and provide the Sustainability Office with key recommendations for updating Leiden University's business travel policy. More detailed information about the study design, statistical analyses, and results is available on request (e-mail: dijkwvan@fsw.leidenuniv.nl).

2. Method

As a first step, we performed a literature review to investigate which (behavioural) factors predict Leiden University's academic staff's business-related international travel behaviour. Next, based on the findings, we developed an online survey to assess the LU academic staff's willingness to engage in sustainable business-related travel behaviour as well as the (behavioural) drivers that explain their current business-related travel behaviour. The survey consisted of both open-ended and closed questions, such as statements, with answering scales ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). The study was approved by the Leiden University Psychology Research Ethics Committee (2023-06-14-W. van Dijk-V1-4857). Data collection took place from June 14th 2023 until July 12th 2023, and the survey was completed by 175 academic staff members of the Leiden University. Most of the respondents are employed at the Humanities, Science, and Social and Behavioural Sciences faculties. However, we have no reason to believe that the findings would have been significantly different if the sample had included the other faculties as well. Therefore, we think that the findings from this research can be generalized to the other faculties of Leiden University as well. The sample included respondents from all academic positions (i.e., PhD candidates, post-docs, assistant professors, associate professors, and full professors) as well as from various age groups.

3. Results

In this section, we discuss the key findings of the study.

Awareness of current business travel policy

Leiden University's current business travel policy recommends academic staff to travel by train when destinations are within 500 km or reachable within 6 hours by train. We found that 112 of 175 respondents (64%) were aware of this policy.

Support for more ambitious and rigorous policies

Because the university is considering updating its travel policy, we assessed Leiden University's academic staff's degree of support for alternative, more stringent business-related international travel policies. That is, we asked the respondents to indicate their support for three alternative travel policies that varied in the ambitiousness of their sustainability goals. These three alternative policies recommended the academic staff to travel by train when the travel destination is within 600 km or reachable within 7 hours by train (suggestion 1), within 800 km or reachable within 9 hours by train (suggestion 2), or within 1200 km or reachable within 12 hours by train (suggestion 3). Moreover, we examined whether support varies depending on whether policies are voluntary or mandatory. A voluntary travel policy means that LU *recommends* the academic staff to take a train when the travel destination is reachable within the specified range. A mandatory travel policy means that LU *requires* the academic staff to take a train when the travel destination is reachable within the specified travel time. Thus, the difference between these two types of travel policies is the level of autonomy LU leaves to the academic staff. The analyses revealed two main findings, which are depicted in Figure 1 below. First, the percentage of respondents who supported the proposed policies significantly decreased as the alternative policies became more ambitious. Second, the respondents showed more support for the voluntary travel policy compared to the mandatory travel policy.

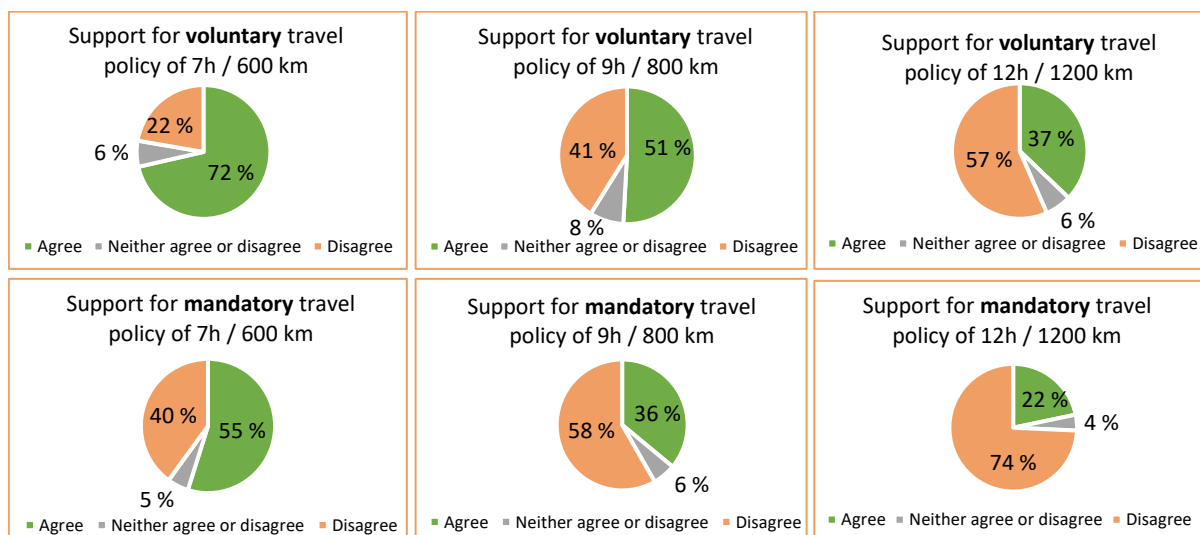


Figure 1. Support for alternative travel policies that vary in ambitiousness (sustainability) and in autonomy (voluntary vs. mandatory).

Behavioural drivers of business-related travel: Results of closed questions

We used closed questions to examine whether the (behavioural) factors *attitudes*, *perceived behavioural control*, *social norms*, *concern for status* and *past behaviour* are associated with Leiden University's academic staff's intention to travel internationally by train or by plane for work.

Train travel

Our analyses showed that a *positive attitude* towards business-related train travel and the *perceived behavioural control* associated with such train travel (i.e., the degree to which a person feels that they are in control when travelling by train for business-related meetings) are important drivers of LU's academic staff's intention to travel by train for work. This means that respondents with a more positive attitude and those who feel more in control have a high intention to travel by train to business-related meetings. Results further suggested that respondents' intention to travel by train for work is not driven by *social norms* regarding business-related train travel (i.e., what respondents think their family and friends or colleagues think of travelling by train), respondents' *past business-related train travel*, or their *concern for status* (i.e., the perceived impact of business-related travel on respondents' career).

Air travel

Our analyses showed that a *positive attitude* towards business-related air travel and respondents' *past business-related air travel* are important drivers of LU's academic staff's intention to travel by plane for work. This means that the more positively respondents perceive business-related air travel and the more they have travelled by plane in the past, the more they have the intention to travel by plane for work. So, in contrast to the findings for train travel, respondents' past behaviour was found to be related to their behavioural intention. Consistent with the findings for train travel, results further suggested that respondents' intention to travel by plane for work is not driven by *social norms* regarding business-related air travel and respondents' *concern for status*. In addition, inconsistent with the findings for train travel, *perceived behavioural control* associated with business-related air travel did not drive respondents' intention to travel by plane.

Behavioural drivers of business-related travel: Results of open-ended questions

Analyses of the open-ended questions regarding (behavioural) factors that might *hinder* and *promote* respondents to travel internationally by train or plane (for destinations reachable within 7 hours by train or within 600km) provided additional insight into the drivers of business-related travel behaviour among Leiden University's academic staff. Because we aim to provide policy advice to the university, we will focus on (behavioural) factors (i.e., key themes identified based on respondents' answers) that Leiden University can influence. In addition, we discuss several (behavioural) factors that Leiden University policy cannot influence (such as delays or a lack of [direct] train connections to certain destinations) but may help Leiden University to understand the behaviour and help in the implementation and promotion of its travel policy. Quotations are included as illustrations of (behavioural) factors.

Costs

Costs were often mentioned as a barrier to business-related international train travel. According to respondents, flying is less expensive than taking the train. Apart from the fact that respondents thought that train tickets are more expensive, they indicated that travelling by train may require staying an extra night and more meals. This appears to create a trade-off between attending (multiple) conferences by plane versus attending fewer (if any) conferences by train. Considering the higher overall costs of train travel, respondents indicated that they would be more likely to take the train if their travel budget permitted it.

“[...] we only have a fixed amount of budget available, so taking the plane is cheaper, it is not a choice for traveling by train or plane, but if we can or cannot go to that conference.”

“I try to take sustainable options but the difficulty is that it sometimes leads to frowning from the HR.”

Time and timing

Another important factor that respondents often mentioned as a driver of business-related international travel behaviour is time and timing. According to the respondents, for many destinations travelling by plane is quicker and more time-efficient than travelling by train. Train travel might also require being away for one or two extra nights. Some respondents indicated feeling pressured to return to work as soon as possible and mentioned teaching obligations that require them to be back on a certain day, and/or not being able to afford to spend more time travelling, as they have work that needs to be completed. Some respondents mentioned personal circumstances (such as their family situation) as a reason for not wanting to stay away from home for an extended period, making train travel less appealing than air travel. Some mentioned that being allowed to take a (more expensive) night train or direct connection may help in this regard.

“If I have to travel during teaching, I might not be able to afford the longer travel time.”

“If this means that I am longer away from home, which has repercussions on my partner who then has to take care of our kids.”

Remote working and first-class tickets

A large share of respondents indicated the ability to work remotely as a promoting factor for business-related international train travel. However, some respondents did specify that to work on the train,

there would need to be appropriate working conditions (e.g., a comfortable chair, a desk, a quiet environment, and reliable Wi-Fi). As a result, pre-travel uncertainty regarding the suitability of train working conditions may lead academic staff to opt for air travel. There may be exceptions, as a few respondents indicated that they suffer from motion sickness, which prevents them from using their travel time for work.

“Being unsure about the working conditions in the train. Is there electricity? Is it quiet enough to work? If not, you ruin (half) a day of working on travelling.”

Respondents quite frequently mentioned the opportunity to travel first class. They thought that a first-class seat would provide them with a suitable working environment, enabling them to work during the trip, while also recharging so they can arrive at their destination with good energy levels.

“First class tickets would be very welcome, especially to be able to work during the trip. The university already pays for these, but there is an incentive from the institute to not make use of this option.”

Comfort and other (behavioural) factors

Another factor driving respondents' business-related international travel behaviour, was comfort. Travelling by train was described as more comfortable compared to air travel, with more comfortable chairs, more leg space, the possibility to walk around, the option to sit together with colleagues, and less waiting time in security lines.

“If everything goes well, you can just sit and relax.”

Although beyond control of Leiden University, comfort, and other (behavioural) factors may still provide important information for policy. Other examples frequently mentioned by the respondents were the (un)reliability of the train network, the lack of train connections to certain destinations, and the (un)availability of train tickets on certain connections (e.g., train to London). It may be possible to accommodate these (behavioural) factors when designing a new business travel policy.

“[...] you often have to transfer multiple times. This brings (at least in me) a fear of missing the next train (as delays happen often).”

“The question is not distance, but accessibility [...]. One travels quicker for 1000 km to Switzerland with the train (no problems there) than 800 to Berlin. So the question should be [in] hours of netto travelling.”

“I love the train, so if it's a practical option I would always be happy to.”

4. Recommendations

The current study provides insight into the willingness of Leiden University academic staff members (specifically PhD candidates, post-docs, assistant professors, associate professors, and full professors) to engage in more sustainable business-related international travel, as well as the (behavioural) factors that drive their business-related travel. Results show that most of the academic staff supports a business travel policy that recommends people to travel by train when the travel destination is within 7 hours of train travel or within 600 kilometres. In addition, results suggest putting emphasis on accessibility (hours of travelling) instead of distance (kilometres), since some destinations are simply more accessible than others (due to better connections). Results also indicate that there is less support for more ambitious and rigorous policies. *Requiring* the staff to travel by train, instead of *recommending* them to do so, may interfere with their need for autonomy.

The study further sheds light on key (behavioural) factors that promote or hinder academic staff members from taking the train instead of the plane. In short, traveling by train is perceived as (too) expensive and time-consuming, which discourages academic staff from traveling sustainably. While on the other hand, train travel is perceived as (more) comfortable and the academic staff values the ability to work remotely while traveling by train, which encourages academic staff to travel by train. Finally, results show that a positive attitude towards train travel encourages staff's intention to travel by train. The same applies to air travel. Below we provide some recommendations to increase sustainable business-related international travel behaviour among the Leiden University academic staff based on our findings.

Address the (behavioural) factors that promote and hinder business-related train travel

- Make sure that the academic staff's travel budget is sufficient to allow them to take the train (i.e., to pay for more expensive tickets, a longer stay, extra meals, etc.).
- Reduce the workload to create the (extra) time needed for the academic staff to travel by train.
- Consider making first-class tickets a default.
- Inform the academic staff about the available facilities in the train (e.g., the availability of Wi-Fi, silent compartments, power outlets). Allow and promote first-class train travel and seat reservations.
- Stress both the comforts of train travel (e.g., comfortable seats, availability of Wi-Fi) and the discomforts of air travel (e.g., lots of on-ground waiting time).
- Base the travel policy only on the number of hours of train travel, instead of kilometres.
- Make train travel easy by assisting in the booking process and providing a clear overview of which connections are reachable within the policy's limits.

Individual autonomy

The findings highlight that academic staff favours voluntary measures over mandatory ones. Therefore, when considering changing business travel policies, it is important to create room for individual autonomy by, for example, emphasizing that there may be exceptions based on (individual) circumstances.

Raise awareness of sustainable travel policy

Finally, part of the academic staff is not aware of the current sustainable business travel policy. Although increased awareness does not always directly result in behaviour change, it would be advantageous that staff members are aware of relevant policies regarding their business travel behaviour and decisions. An awareness campaign could emphasize the advantages of train travel that have been mentioned in this report. This might make train travel seem more appealing to Leiden University academic staff members as a positive attitude toward train travel was found to increase academic staff's willingness to travel by train.

From past behaviour to new behaviour

Academic staff who have travelled by plane in the past may be more likely to do so in the future. While the specific underlying mechanism for this relationship cannot be determined from this research, discouraging new academic staff (such as PhDs) to travel by plane (encourage train travel instead) from the beginning of their career may be effective in increasing more sustainable business travel in the future.



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