# Flight reduction – project proposal for SEI Collaborative Grants Scheme

## Applicant details:

**Sustainability team:**

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* Laura Minchella, Project Manager
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## Project summary:

This project seeks analysis and consultation with subject matter experts and relevant University stakeholders to inform engagement and behaviour change initiatives to reduce air travel as a major contributor to University emissions, and encourage smarter travel and more sustainable business and academic processes.

Development of a rationale, case studies and analysis of current state will help guide recommendations to support the University’s commitment *to reducing impacts associated with unsustainable travel* and reach its target set out within the Sustainability Strategy to “*Reduce the number of kilometres flown on University business by 20% by 2025”*. Development of a roadmap towards reducing kilometres flown and CO2 Tons per flight by the University community will be a key milestone and output of the project.

## Project description

This project seeks analysis and consultation with subject matter experts and relevant University stakeholders to inform behaviour change initiatives and engagement with the academic and broader University community to reduce air travel as a major contributor to University emissions. Strategy 13 in the University’s Sustainability Strategy commits us to “*Reduce impacts associated with unsustainable travel to, from and around our campuses*” with a target to “*Reduce the number of kilometres flown on University business by 20% by 2025”*.

A key aspect of this project will be to gain a better understanding of the University’s current state – including the travel behaviours of different staff and departments of the University, the reasons and motivations behind current travel practices, and identify what barriers exist (within the University, the sector, environments etc) which slow down or prevent sustainable travel behaviours and work practices. Identification of our future state – defining how we want to act and conduct business in future, will also be supported by current research and best practise models and practises that are currently being trialled and implemented within the sector or other industries more broadly.

Discussions of responsible travel and flight reduction have commenced with University leadership and sustainability Steering Committee members. Initial considerations and questions raised include:

* How should we define sustainable, responsible and essential travel? Are there activities where travel is essential and cannot be replaced by virtual engagement?
* How do we consider and capitalise on the lessons learned from the pandemic, including the significant use of technology to enable global engagement without flying (for example, through academic conferences)?
* How do we balance, evaluate and express the value of core University activities that require travel? For example, travel encouraged by the University and undertaken for student mobility programs, domestic Industry and Community Project Units (ICPUs) or Service Learning in Indigenous Community (SLIC) projects and research? Or the importance of travel to support (particularly junior) academic career development?
* Additionally, how do we define equivalent value? There is opportunity to develop common and agreed to criteria in order for staff to assess the quality of their travel to reduce the quantity of travel. Definitions on essential travel will need to be discussed, and whether the number of non-essential travel will be capped at an individual or department level.
* Should staff/departments be incentivised for deciding not to fly? For example, incentivised to attend or present a conference online rather than in person (with appropriate enhancements to leave provisions)? Or for travelling via rail rather than air where feasible?
* Conversely, should there be disincentives for choosing to travel by air? For example, as foreshadowed in the strategy, by imposing a levy on flights booked for University business, with funds used for sustainability activity on campus, or a cap on kilometres flown annually by individuals or teams?
* What factors need to be considered in solutions for different groups, for example high flyers and those who fly business/first class, and factor in the needs of Indigenous, interstate, rural and remote staff, students and partners?
* Should there be a different approach for academic and professional focused travel, or for University-funded travel and grant-funded travel?
* What implications might efforts to reduce flight travel have on University policies, for example, on current travel, expenses and leave policies? What barriers or issues have been previously faced when updating travel policy and procedures? (for example, workcover and insurance issues)
* What opportunities are there for the University to provide broader thought leadership in this space, for example, with Government and Higher Education networks?

**Project Impact:**

Flight reduction will provide the largest positive impact to the University’s total emissions, with flights constituting a fifth of the University’s total emissions in 2019, representing the second highest source of emissions after the University’s electricity use.[[1]](#footnote-2) With the introduction of the University’s 100% renewable PPA in July 2022, flights have now become our largest source of emissions. 2020 and 2021 saw a natural decrease in flight travel due to COVID-19, however with the easing of domestic and international restrictions, travel has increased for both personal and business purposes in recent months.

This project also aligns with the research strategies of Sydney Environment Institute, in particular the [Transition and Transformation](https://www.sydney.edu.au/sydney-environment-institute/our-research/transition-and-transformation.html) research stream. Questions explored within this project will navigate around the stream’s core question: “How do we navigate to a more sustainable future?” Collaboration with the community and the translation of current research in travel behaviours and effective interventions will assist with decision-making and implementation of strategic initiatives, and lead to better-informed community discourse, University culture, innovation and impact.

Efforts made by the University to reform and reduce travel, and showcase how academic research and business can be successfully conducted sustainably, shows public leadership and commitment towards sustainable practise. It also leads the way for further reform sector wide, in networks such as the Group of Eight, Universities Australia and Universitas 21 (U21). Backing of proposed changes and initiatives with research through this project will also assist with future engagement with academic communities and better-informed discourse.

**Project Outputs:**

The proposed outcome of this project is the development of a roadmap to assist the University community towards reducing the number of flights taken, kilometres flown and/or CO2tons per flight (which is impacted by class travelled). Activities to inform recommendations set out in the roadmap could include the following:

* **Literature review and case studies:** Further investigation into research of ‘what does responsible travel look like?’, identifying opportunities and best practice through case studies in what other Universities and industries are doing successfully in this space.
* **Articulation of rationale**, value and responsibility at an individual, department and University level to promote a low carbon working culture.
* **University Policy context:** Audit of current travel and expenses frameworks, policies and leave definitions.
* **Comparative data:** Report recent travel data trends with easing of domestic and international travel restrictions, and comparison to available public data from other universities. Understanding of how academic business travel contributes to total global flights will also be valuable.
* **Current state vs future state analysis** of behaviour and activities, with lessons learned from the pandemic. This will help determine readiness to change with the number of staff who already (or wish to) prioritise sustainability within their research and operational core business, and determine what practises are already happening. This will establish a better understanding of current motivations and barriers towards behaviour change, and also develops baselines to measure new interventions.
* Completion of a University **stakeholder map and engagement model**, and **definition of boundaries** including University-funded and grant-funded travel to determine scope and priorities areas for the roadmap.

It is envisaged that the roadmap and recommendations proposed will be guided by and implemented by a University working group or Community of Practise.

**Budget:**

Proposal for Sustainability team to allocate up to $50k to support a fellowship grant to progress the project. Potential for SEI to contribute in-kind support and/or a seed grant to the successful fellow if required.

**Contributors:**

Completion of a University stakeholder map and engagement model has been identified as an output of the project, however the Sustainability Steering Committee have nominated key stakeholders to be engaged as part of this project:

* University’s Sustainability Team
* Heads of School
* Early or mid-career academic/s
* FGM or school manager/s
* Representative/s from the Research Portfolio (inc. Office of Global Engagement)
* Representative/s from the Operations Portfolio (principally HR)
* Representative/s from the Vice Chancellors Portfolio
* Representative/s from the Vice-Principal (External Relations)
* Representative/s from the Policy Lab
* Researchers and subject matter experts on sustainable travel practises, flight reduction and behaviour change within academics communities.
* External sustainability contacts from other leading national or international universities in this space.
* Data custodians: University’s Travel Partner team.

**Timeline:**

**TBC, with input with SEI:**

* **October 2022:** Scoping meetings with Sustainability team and SEI.
* **November 2022 – January 2023:** Literature review and development of case studies.
* **February 2023:** Presentation of findings.
* **February – March 2023:** Comparative data analysis, University policy and procedures context and articulation of rationale.
* **End of March 2023:** Presentation of findings.
* **April – May 2023:** Commencement of current state vs future state analysis, interviews with key university stakeholders. Presentation of summary findings.
* **June 2023:** Development of roadmap, stakeholder map and engagement model. Presentation of roadmap and proposed next steps.
1. The University’s 2019 Greenhouse gas emissions inventory by scope and source. Data obtained from: OP1\_USyd\_pathways\_model\_final\_v1.1report. This inventory has been prepared by Point Advisory, based on data provided by University in February 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)