

How are universities tackling emissions associated with food and flying?

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New research from the University of Manchester has identified various ways in which UK higher education institutions are beginning to tackle emissions associated with business travel and catering. These are two

substantial contributors to emissions in this sector, and difficult to decarbonise. The findings show need for further sector-wide efforts to tackle the planet's most pressing issue.

This new study, from the University of Manchester's Tyndall Centre for Climate Change and the Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations (CAST), analyzed publicly available policies of 66 UK universities to identify strategies related to long-distance business travel and catering. For each university, documents including Carbon Management Plans and Annual Reports, Travel Plans and Sustainable Food Policies were downloaded, cataloged and reviewed.

Long-distance business travel and catering (particularly meat-based meals) are substantial contributors to the carbon footprint of universities (and many other organizations), but are typically under-accounted for in carbon management planning. The collaborative research team set-out to understand the extent to which university plans and actions in these areas are commensurate with climate emergency declarations, and make recommendations to support setting sufficiently ambitious targets and actions.

The research, published today in *Climate Policy*, demonstrates that action on [climate change](#) in universities is extending beyond the familiar focus on energy related emissions to engage in more complex workplace practices, including long-distance business travel and catering. However, increasing sector-wide effort is unavoidable if universities are to fulfil their climate emergency declarations and align emissions reduction strategies with the UK Government's net zero ambitions.

Lead author on the research paper Professor Claire Hoolohan, The University of Manchester said: "Many universities omit, or only partially account for, business travel and food within their carbon management reporting. However, the importance of emissions in these areas is widely

recognized and there is evidence of pioneer institutions setting targets and taking action to reduce emissions in these areas.

"Across the sector more action is required to reduce emissions. To support sector-wide action, this briefing note focusses on targets and actions that should be implemented to rapidly and substantially reduce emissions in these two areas, and contribute towards a low-carbon workplace culture."

The UK's Committee on Climate Change recognizes aviation and agriculture as sectors where it is very challenging to reduce emissions. Mobility scholars have shown that aeromobility is deeply embedded in the institutional culture of Higher Education, with individual career progression and institutional standing linked to international mobility.

Similarly, for meat-eating, coordinated developments across production-consumption systems sustain meat-heavy diets, and this is no less true in workplace cafeterias and catering. Subsequently, reducing emissions requires the reconfiguration of professional practices and institutional policies to enable low-carbon transformation.

The research finds many universities planning to reduce emissions in these areas, but few have robust targets to support decarbonisation. Further it is action, not plans or targets, that reduce emissions and few universities have actions in place to reduce emissions across both areas. That said, there were examples of good practice in both areas, and future action could focus on the following:

Positive actions on flying and food for Universities:

- Review and define 'essential travel' to support staff in avoiding travel as much as possible.
- Maximize the number of engagements per trip, reduce the

distance and frequency.

- Make train travel the default for journeys within a specified distance, with additional time and funding for long distance rail travel
- Focus on reducing trips of frequent fliers and recognize the differentiated [travel](#) needs of staff with children, care commitments and medical needs.
- Review University policies for contradictions that encourage flying
- Reduce meat, and replace with plant-based alternatives
- Make plant-based event catering the default to spark conversation and enable staff to try new meals.
- Experiment at sub-organization level, then share learning and scale up

Professor Alice Larkin, head of engineering at the University of Manchester, said: "Higher education's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that rapid, deep and widespread changes are possible. The shifts in our academic activities that we've all experienced, as well as changes to how we've started to operate in new ways, present significant opportunities to establish alternative, more sustainable, practices."

More information: Claire Hoolohan et al. Responding to the climate emergency: how are UK universities establishing sustainable workplace routines for flying and food?, *Climate Policy* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/14693062.2021.1881426](https://doi.org/10.1080/14693062.2021.1881426)

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