

Universities urged to turn campuses paperless to cut deforestation rates

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Universities will do the environment a good service and trim deforestation levels if they turn their campuses paperless, according to a study published as part of the [2022 Advances in Science and Engineering Technology International Conferences \(ASET\)](#).

The call comes as hundreds of renowned environment academics and

scientists are taking part in COP28 [climate conference](#) currently convened in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates.

The conference is the largest annual meeting convened by the United Nations. More than 70,000 delegates are reported to have flocked to Dubai for the conference, among them hundreds of [climate scientists](#) and academics.

"Our study underlines the environmental and financial benefits of a paperless approach in higher [education](#)," says Prof. Imad Alsyouf, one of the co-authors. "The study emphasizes the need for digital literacy in modern education and highlights the role of universities in promoting sustainability."

The study's five authors happen to be from the University of Sharjah based in the UAE, which is about 30 kilometers away from COP28 venue.

Higher education and [sustainable development](#) are a well-researched topic, and COP28's different conference facilities showcase pavilions where universities in the region and beyond exhibit activities on how to make their campuses as sustainable as possible.

"Evidence suggests that the traditional use of paper-based processes in daily working practices results in numerous flaws, risks, and financial burdens," write the scientists. "Many higher education institutions are currently adopting this initiative of going paperless to make their operations more cost-effective, seamless and efficient."

Higher education institutions, home to environment science, promote their sustainability achievements and vie for top places in the global sustainability assessment agency [UI GreenMetric World University Rankings](#).

The annual global higher education green metric employs a six-point approach, covering six areas: infrastructure, energy and climate change, transportation, waste, water and education. Besides making their operations more cost-effective, seamless, and efficient, going paperless boosts their chances of winning better slots on the coveted international ranking of the sustainability performance of world universities.

A dedicated campaign by [higher education](#) institutions to go paperless is bound to set a good example for other organizations to reduce the use of paper, maintain the scientists. They write, "Paper industry is one of the main players of deforestation, and more than 900 million trees are cut every year for paper industries. Nowadays, papers are being produced more, and even more trees are being cut, and this leads to negative consequences in the future.

"Higher education institutions and universities play a critical role in saving the environment and raising awareness. Many administrative and educational works implemented at the universities are highly based on papers. This means using high amounts of papers and cutting more trees. In addition, this requires more storage places to store the papers and sometimes these papers could get lost or damaged."

In their paper, the scientists investigate the role of the COVID-19 pandemic in accelerating the transition towards paperless campuses, using the authors' home institution, the University of Sharjah, as a [case study](#). They analyze paper consumption data over three academic years, encompassing the pre-pandemic, peak pandemic, and post-pandemic periods.

The results, according to the study, reveal "a huge drop in paper usage during September 2019 to August 2020 and [a] cost percentage drop of 53% in September 2019 to August 2020 academic year, [followed] by a 38% decrease from September 2020 to August 2021."

The timeframe of the study includes the peak of the pandemic (2019–2020) when university campuses across the world went digital. It also covers the post-pandemic period of 2021 which saw many universities returning to pre-pandemic practices of relying on paper to implement their administrative and education duties.

"Our paper demonstrates a practical framework for universities aiming to reduce paper usage. It offers insights into implementing digital solutions in [educational settings](#), encouraging broader adoption of paperless practices," says Prof. Alsyouf, adding that the primary goal behind undertaking the project was to "establish a more sustainable, efficient, and digitally advanced educational environment, aligning with global trends in environmental consciousness and digitalization."

Although the study does not explicitly discuss industry interest or external engagement, the outcomes and methodologies could be appealing to institutions, and organizations focusing on sustainability and digital transformation.

The pandemic, the study observes, was a period in which the University of Sharjah, the target of the investigation, achieved substantial cost reductions through decreased paper usage and associated expenses. It highlights evidence that the traditional use of paper-based processes in daily working practices results in numerous flaws, risks, and financial burdens.

Asked about the practical implications of the findings, Dr. Iman Abdel Shahid, a co-author, points to "the need for [digital literacy](#) in modern education and highlights the role of universities in promoting sustainability. As our concern for the environment is progressively growing, the transition to a paperless environment has become a driving force behind sustainable development."

Despite its many benefits, a paperless campus is not easy to attain and sustain at the same time, the authors point out. They warn of many challenges ahead as going green in any aspect or area necessitates substantial steps and drastic changes.

"Shifting to a paperless system is not a task that can be accomplished in few days or weeks. It is not an easy task, and it requires patience, great efforts, and contributions from students and employees from all levels," they write.

To accomplish a paperless campus successfully, the scientists offer the following recommendations:

- A reliable Wi-Fi network that can be accessed faster without any interruptions.
- Adequate training programs for the staff that are not very familiar with the advanced devices.
- Sufficient training and workshops regarding the new web applications that are being utilized for the academic and administrative purposes.
- Launch of awareness campaigns to promote the benefits of going paperless.
- More investment in robust digital infrastructure.

More information: Bushra Hussein Al Jaberi et al, The Role of Covid-19 in Moving Towards a Paperless Campus: The Case of University of Sharjah, *2022 Advances in Science and Engineering Technology International Conferences (ASET)* (2022). [DOI: 10.1109/ASET53988.2022.9734887](https://doi.org/10.1109/ASET53988.2022.9734887)

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