

Minimising the impact of aviation emissions: what way forward?
An expert meeting aiming to lift off sustainable academic travelling
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“Your Planet or Your Career! The Academic Flyers’ Dilemma: Perception or Reality?”

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Biography:

Romain Weikmans is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow of the Fund for Scientific Research (F.R.S.-FNRS) at the Centre for Studies on Sustainable Development of the Université Libre de Bruxelles / Free University of Brussels (Belgium). His main research interests lie in the interface between climate change, foreign aid, and global governance. Romain is a Lecturer in the Faculty of Science (ULB) and at Sciences Po Lille. He is the Vice-Chair of the Working Group “Energy-Climate” of the Belgian Federal Council for Sustainable Development.

Abstract:

Air transport is rapidly growing worldwide, and forecasts suggest the number of passengers could double over the next twenty years¹. The environmental impacts of the aviation sector, especially on climate change, is of concern to a growing number of analysts². Air passengers include scientists who travel to conferences or attend research and educational meetings. Greenhouse gas emissions from air travel account for a significant part in the carbon footprint of many universities³. Similarly, at the individual level, air travel emissions are often a significant part of a researcher’s professional carbon footprint⁴. It is therefore difficult to significantly reduce institutional carbon emissions without reducing air travel emissions.

This, however, seems to pose a dilemma, both at the institutional and at the individual level. Indeed, at both levels, the commitment to reduce air travel emissions is (sometimes perceived to be) in contradiction with other objectives such as research quality, productivity, impact or visibility. At the institutional level, it may also be perceived as coming into conflict with strategic objectives such as internationalization and excellence. At the individual level, the necessity to reduce air travel emissions may (be considered to) interfere with career progression, in a context of fierce international competition for tenured positions. In this presentation I will discuss if this tension/dilemma is a perception or a reality.

I will show that even if this tension is more of a perception than a reality, it is still a big deal for at least two reasons. First, because it may be detrimental to researchers’ wellbeing as researchers (perceive that they) are stuck in an impossible choice between the reduction of their air travel emissions and the production of impactful research/their career progression. Second, because this tension may stand in the way of researchers’ willingness to engage in less carbon-intensive travel practices because such practices are (or researchers perceive them to be) incompatible with scientific production and success, and with career progression.

I will conclude by suggesting some potential ways forward toward reducing the carbon footprint of our professional travels without compromising research quality and productivity, academic success, and careers’ prospects.

¹ <https://www.iata.org/pressroom/pr/Pages/2018-10-24-02.aspx>

² <https://www.carbonbrief.org/aviation-consume-quarter-carbon-budget>

³ https://www.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/main/eth-zurich/nachhaltigkeit/Bildmaterial/virtualconference/Janisch%20et%20al%202017_Changing%20university%20culture%20towards%20reduced%20air%20travel_Background%20Report%20Virtual%20Conference.pdf

⁴ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1470160X13002306>