

How the climate crisis affects internationalisation

Report of a survey into internationalisation and
climate action

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Contents

Introduction	2
Methodology of the survey and analysis	2
Findings	4
Institutional strategies and climate action	4
Strategic actions	6
Staff and student travel	7
International recruitment and incoming mobility	10
Transnational education (TNE) partnerships	12
Research	14
Trends	16
Conclusions and next steps	19
Conclusion	19
Next steps	20
Acknowledgements	22

Introduction

In October 2021, in advance of COP26, Universities UK published a set of commitments¹ on climate action, backed by its 140 members. The commitments include setting targets for scope 1 and 2 emission² reductions which support the UK Government's plans for reducing emissions by 78% by 2035 (compared to 1990 levels) and achieving net zero by 2050 at the latest (or devolved government equivalents). They also include setting a target for scope 3 emission reductions or committing to a programme of work to set targets as soon as possible.

There are huge benefits to internationalisation – for students, for institutions, for knowledge exchange and research collaboration. However, institutional climate commitments will evidently impact institutions' international strategies and activities and there are not only tensions but also opportunities between climate action and internationalisation. Earlier in 2021, Universities UK International (UUKi) convened a task and finish group of 15 representatives from UK universities with the aim of identifying and addressing where progress could be made and what support was needed.

One of the recommendations from the task and finish group was to run a member survey to gain an understanding of the extent to which international strategies (or equivalent) in higher education institutions are linked to and impacted by their corresponding sustainability strategies. The survey aimed to find out more about practical actions that the sector is taking as a result of the climate emergency. These include actions related to research, outward mobility, international student recruitment and transnational education (TNE). It also aimed to uncover more about the opportunities available to institutions, discover best practice; and identify areas for further support. This report summarises the findings of that survey and suggests some areas for further action.

Methodology of the survey and analysis

The mixed method survey ran from 29 November to 22 December 2021. It contained both closed and open-ended questions which were peer reviewed by the UUKi task and finish group prior to publishing.

It was aimed at the senior individual in the institution with strategic responsibility for internationalisation. Respondents were mainly at the level of Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Pro-Vice-Chancellor International or equivalent. Responses were limited to one

¹ <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/confronting-climate-emergency>

² https://ghgprotocol.org/sites/default/files/standards_supporting/FAQ.pdf

response per member institution and each question only allowed one response per respondent (unless stated otherwise).

44 out of 146 Universities UK International members (30.1%) responded to the survey, which included responses from institutions in all four nations:

- 6 out of 16 (37.5%) Scottish institutions
- 1 out of 2 (50.0%) Northern Irish institutions
- 36 out of 120 (30.0%) English institutions
- 1 out of 8 (12.5%) Welsh institutions

The survey received responses from representatives of all mission groups (with some institutions being aligned to several mission groups):

- 11.8% of University Alliance members
- 41.2% of Million Plus members
- 42.3% of Russell Group members
- 15.4% of GuildHE members
- 29.9% of members not aligned to a mission group

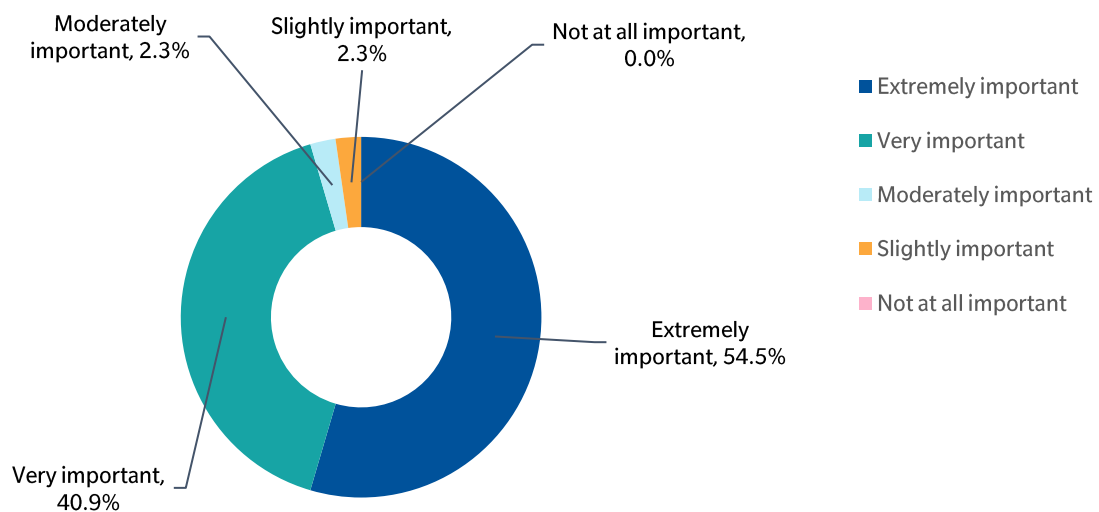
The responses of the survey can therefore be considered representative of the sector.

Findings

Institutional strategies and climate action

The first section of the survey looks at the status quo of institutional strategies and the extent to which institutional strategies include climate action and carbon reduction aims and how, where applicable, these challenges translate into international strategies. When asked about the importance of climate action and carbon reduction in their current institutional strategy, the vast majority (95.4%) stated that climate action and carbon reduction are extremely or very important. 4.6% considered them to be moderately or slightly important (Figure 1):

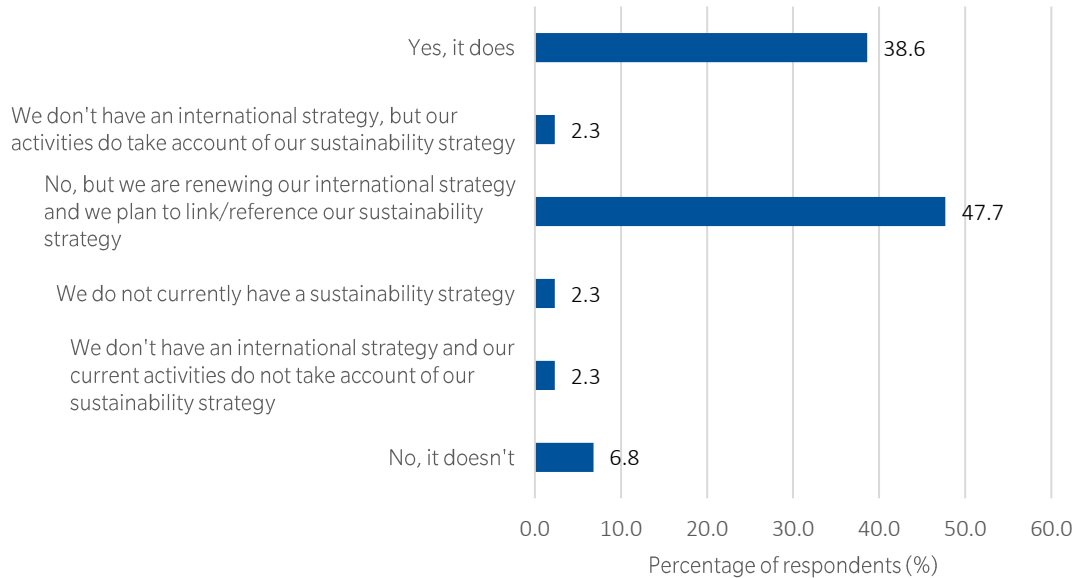
Figure 1: Importance given to climate action and carbon reduction in universities' current institutional strategy



Looking at international strategies or strategies around international activities and whether these link to their institution's sustainability strategy (Figure 2), almost half of respondents (47.7%) selected that they are currently renewing their international strategy and are planning to link it to their sustainability strategy. A further 38.6% of respondents already have such links in place.

Of the rest, 2.3% stated that while they don't have an international strategy, they do consider their sustainability strategy in their international activities. 9.1% indicated that their strategy or activities do not currently link to their sustainability strategy and a further 2.3% stated that they do not have a sustainability strategy.

Figure 2: Does your international strategy (or strategies around international activities) directly link to or reference your sustainability strategy in any way?



The survey also asked whether the respondent's role includes responsibilities for sustainability, implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)³ or similar. There is a 50:50 split between those who have responsibility as part of their role and those who do not. Just over 25% of the half who have responsibility for sustainability also report that it is linked to clear objectives and targets. Of the 50% who do not have such responsibility, 38.6% indicated that this sits with another member of staff from their executive team.

We also wanted to know if members of the university executive teams were part of any institutional, inter-institutional, national, or international networks or working groups that discuss issues relating to sustainability and climate change. The vast majority (90.9%) of respondents indicated that they or members of their executive teams are part of such networks or working groups, with only 9.1% indicating that they do not participate in any such groups. Members of the executive team are part of the following groups:

- 75.0% are part of institutional working groups
- 47.7% are part of national networks
- 40.9% participate in international networks
- 38.6% are part of inter-institutional networks and working groups

³<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

Examples of networks and working groups mentioned in free text box

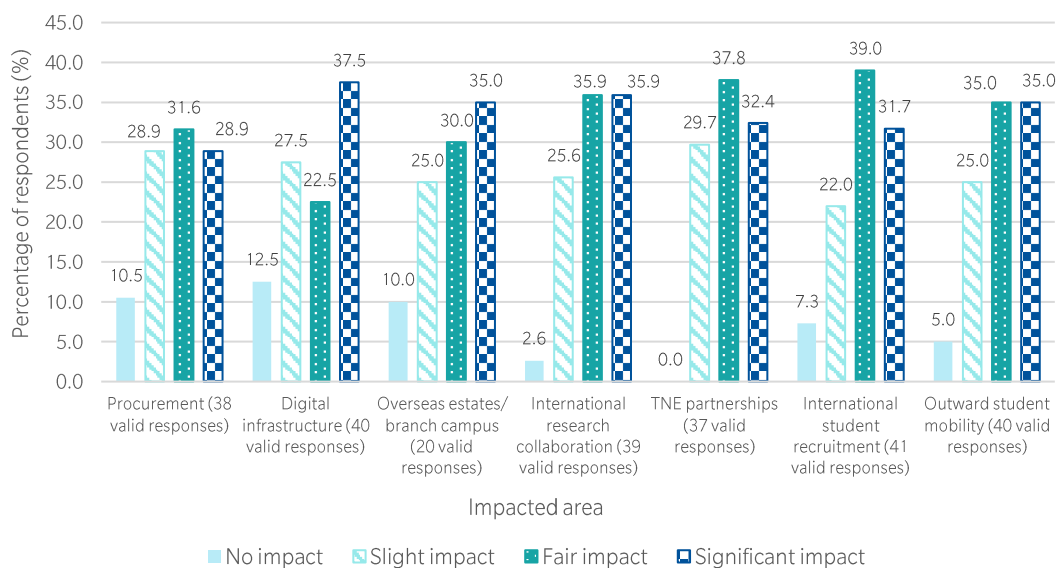
Inter-Institutional level: COP26 Universities Network, GW4 Alliance and the Russell Group's Environment and Sustainability Network

National Level: EAUC – The Alliance for Sustainability Leadership in Education

International level: Climate Action Network for International Educators (CANIE), Association of Commonwealth Universities Higher Education and SDG Network

We asked respondents to tell us how different areas of their current international strategies (or equivalent) have been impacted due to carbon reduction and climate action measures (Figure 3). Not applicable answers were excluded.

Figure 3: Impact of climate action and carbon reduction on areas within international strategy



No individual area is significantly more affected than another, but all respondents report an impact on their TNE partnerships.

Strategic actions

In this section, the survey looked more closely at the different international activities carried out by institutions to see which initiatives have already been put in place, those

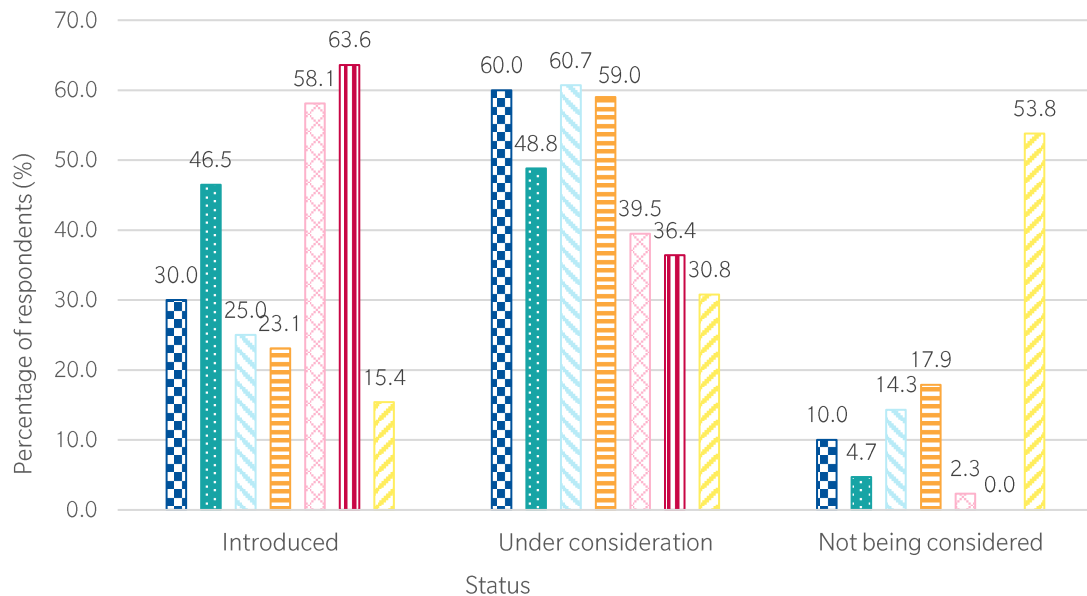
which are being considered and which areas may not be impacted in any way (negatively or positively) by carbon reduction and climate action.

Staff and student travel

The survey asked respondents to indicate which of a range of actions relating to staff and student travel have already been introduced, which are being considered, which are not being considered, or any that are not applicable or unknown (Figure 4):

- Travel management company with environmentally sustainable policy for staff and/or student travel
- Institutional-level environmentally sustainable travel policy or guidance for staff and/or students
- Virtual mobility has replaced some physical mobility, and this will remain post-Covid
- Virtual collaboration with international partners has replaced some physical mobility and this will remain post-Covid
- Change of student destinations for outward study and placements

Figure 4: Please indicate if the following areas: have been introduced, are being considered, are not being considered, are not applicable, or if you don't know.



- Our travel management company has an environmentally sustainable policy for staff mobility (baseline: 30 responses)
- We have an institutional-level environmentally sustainable travel policy or guidance for staff (baseline: 43 responses)
- Our travel management company has an environmentally sustainable policy for student mobility (baseline: 28 responses)
- We have an institutional-level environmentally sustainable travel policy or guidance for students (baseline: 39 responses)
- Virtual mobility has replaced some physical mobility and we plan to keep it this way post-Covid (baseline: 43 responses)
- Virtual collaboration with international partners has replaced some physical mobility and we plan to keep it this way post-Covid (baseline: 44 responses)
- Change of student destinations for outward study and work placements. (baseline: 39 responses)

(Baseline: varied, N/A and don't know responses excluded)

The majority of respondents indicated that most of the listed actions had been introduced or were under consideration. However, the decision to change the destinations for overseas student study or placements is handled differently across institutions. 53.8% indicated that they are not considering this change. In contrast, 46.2% indicated that such changes have been made or are under consideration.

This divide was also mirrored by the respondents when asked if the focus on outgoing mobilities had changed due to climate action and carbon reduction:

- 54.5% have not changed their focus on mobility
- 45.5% have changed or are considering changing the focus on outgoing student mobilities

Examples of actions taken or being considering when changing the focus on outgoing student mobility (free text box)

- Increase of Internationalisation at Home activities such as
 - Collaborative International Learning (COIL)
 - Blended delivery
 - Virtual placement opportunities
- Encourage rail and ferry travel over air travel

Figure 4 also shows that most institutions have thought about replacing some physical mobility by continuing virtual collaborations and virtual mobility post-Covid or have already decided to do so.

- 100% have introduced virtual collaboration with international partners to replace some physical mobility and plan to or are considering keeping it that way post-Covid
- 98% have replaced some physical mobility and plan to or are considering keeping it that way post-Covid

The majority of institutions are currently considering collaborating with travel management companies with environmentally sustainable policies for staff (60.0%) and student (60.7%) travel and institutional policies and guidance for staff travel (48.8%) and student travel (59.0%).

Institutions who indicated that they already had environmentally sustainable travel guidance for staff or students were asked to provide further details regarding the content of such policies or guidance. The respondents could select from pre-populated options and were asked to indicate for each option if they had been introduced, if they are likely to be introduced in the next two years, or if they are aspirational.

- 45.5% only allow flights in economy class as part of the institutional travel guidance or policy
- 43.2% indicate that carbon off-setting will be a part of policies within the next two years
- 40.9% mention reducing travel per staff member as aspirational

Content of environmentally sustainable travel guidance for staff and students – examples from free text box

- Introducing carbon budgeting for travel and/ or wider activities
- A query system for UK and EU air travel
- Advocating or incentivising rail travel
- Authorising long-haul travel only if several objectives are met
- Favouring longer and multi-activity trips over shorter trips

International recruitment and incoming mobility

The survey explored how, and which international student recruitment activities are being affected by climate action and carbon reduction measures.

When asked whether the way institutions recruit internationally has changed in response to carbon reduction and climate action:

- 40.9% of respondents have already introduced changes to their approach
- 31.8% are considering changes to their approach
- 27.3% say that they have not introduced any changes

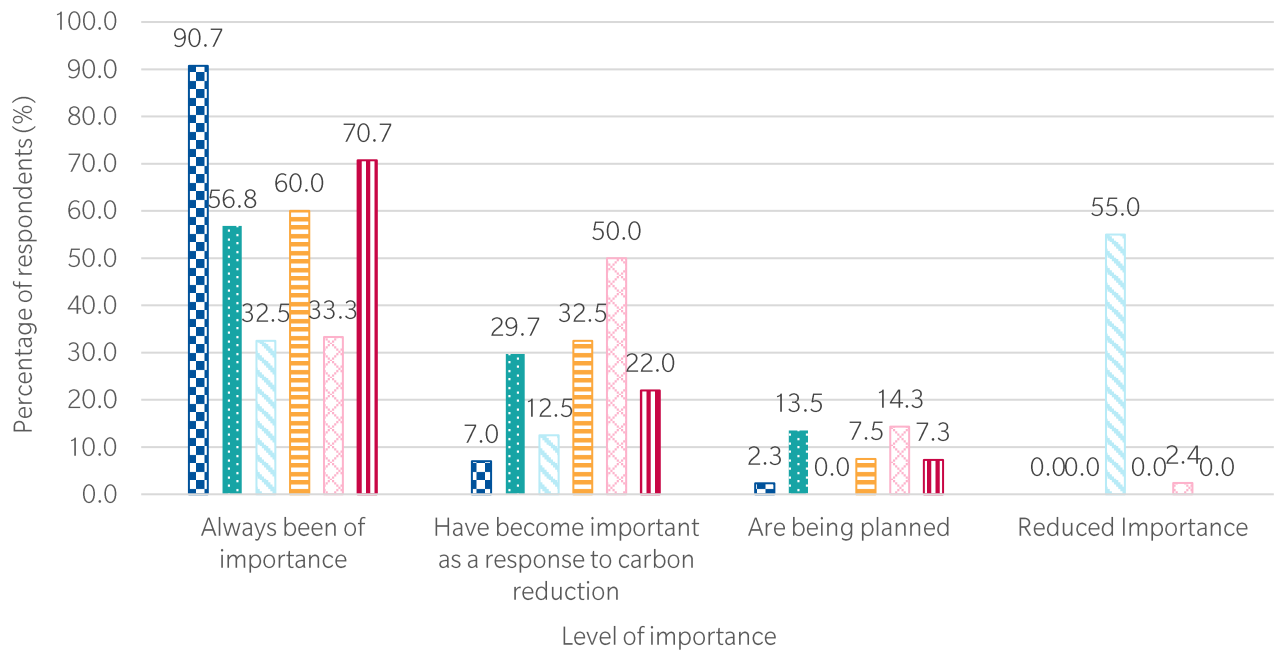
Examples of changes to the way institutions recruit students internationally listed in free text box

- Diversion of travel budget to digital campaigns and virtual recruitment events
- Change from in-person attendance to using partnerships and agents
- Greater involvement of in-country based staff

Figure 5 shows how respondents view the importance of different approaches to international student recruitment, such as using an in-country agent network, and whether the importance of these approaches has changed:

- 55.0% mention a reduction in the importance of staff flying out to participate in in-country recruitment events
- 64.3% indicate that virtual support from academics at such events has increased or is being planned
- 43.2% mention that regional hubs have become more important or are being planned
- 40.0% feel that having staff based overseas has become important as a response to carbon reduction or is being planned

Figure 5: Importance of specified areas to student recruitment



■ Network of in-country agents (Baseline: 43 responses)

■ Regional hubs responsible for student recruitment (Baseline: 37 responses)

■ Academic staff flying out to participate in in-country recruitment events (Baseline: 40 responses)

■ Staff permanently based overseas (Baseline: 40 responses)

■ Virtual support from academics in the UK during recruitment events (Baseline: 42 responses)

■ Focusing on articulation agreements such as 2+2, 3+1 or similar (Baseline: 41 responses)

(Baseline: varied, N/A responses excluded)

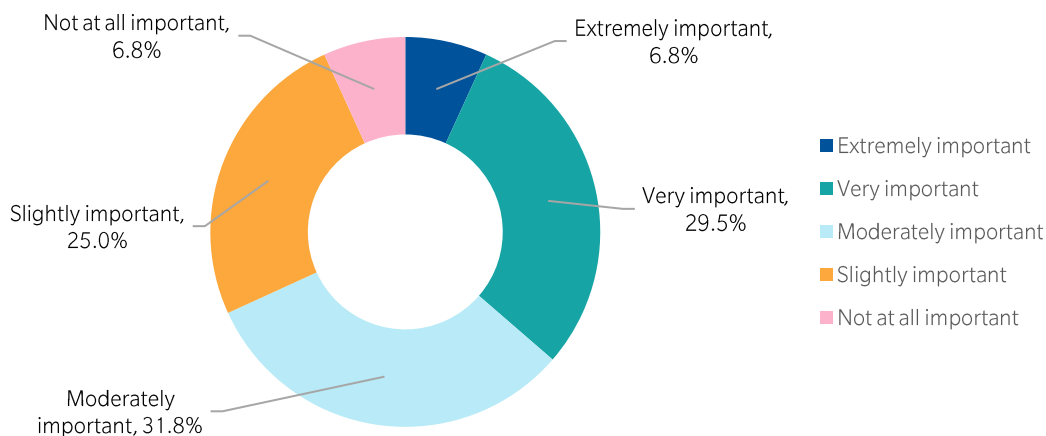
The survey also asked if institutions were considering measures to offset or manage the carbon footprint of students travelling to their institution from abroad. The results are mixed, with 6.8% having introduced measures while 54.5% indicate that they do not have any measures in place and 34.1% are considering options for this.

Transnational education (TNE) partnerships

This section explored whether carbon reduction measures and climate action are impacting the way universities collaborate with their overseas partners, the way TNE models are run and where applicable, how overseas estates are being considered.

When asked if climate-related concerns are important when discussing potential collaboration with a partner, 61.3% of respondents indicate that these concerns play a moderately important or very important role, while 6.8% indicate that these are extremely important (Figure 6). A quarter of respondents indicated that these concerns were slightly important when discussing potential collaborations. Finally, 6.8% indicate that they are not important at all, however respondents did not have the opportunity to select that they did not do any TNE and therefore non-applicable responses would also fall into this category.

Figure 6: Level of importance given to climate-related concerns when discussing a potential collaboration with a partner



The survey also asked if the way universities engage with their TNE partners had been adapted as a result of climate change related concerns. The responses show a near 50:50 split between institutions who have introduced changes and those who haven't.

- 29.5% indicated that they have changed their approach, with a further 15.9% indicating that they support local activities to reduce the impact of climate change

- 9.1% were not aware if changes had been introduced or not

Free text box examples of changes institutions have introduced to their approach to TNE

- Using virtual collaborative provisions to reduce international travel and introduce a blended approach to in-person staff training and student induction events
- Increasing in-country staff to reduce international travel, to replace flying faculty, supporting in-person staff training and student induction events
- Reprioritising where international travel is necessary
- Placing climate action at the centre when developing new partnerships and overseas campuses

Those institutions with overseas estates were asked if they consider these as part of their overall sustainability strategy. The responses show that 35% of respondents already include them or plan to consider including them within the next two years. 50% of these respondents aspire to consider their overseas estates as part of their overall sustainability strategy. 15.0% indicated that they did not have any plans to consider this (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Do you consider the carbon footprint of your overseas estates as part of your overall sustainability strategy?



Finally, this section explored if the importance of TNE overall has changed as a response to climate change and carbon reduction targets.

- 54.5% indicated that the importance of TNE has increased or significantly increased as a response to climate change and carbon reduction concerns
- 43.2% indicated that the importance of TNE has not changed
- 2.3% reported a decrease
- 0% indicated a significant decrease

Research

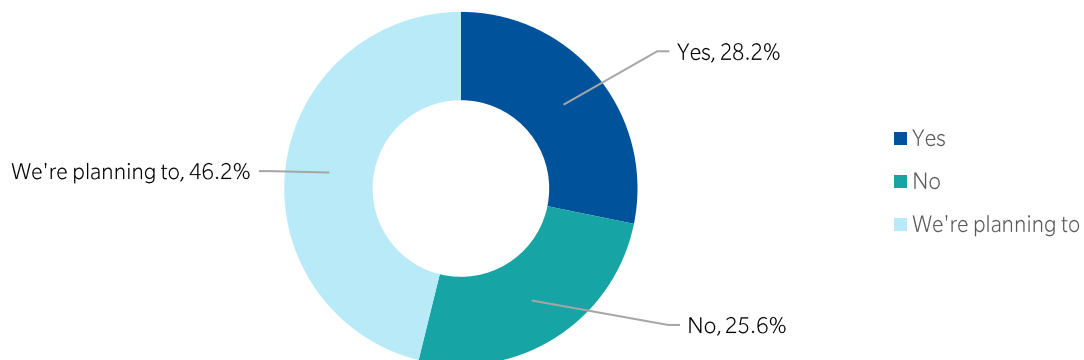
This section explored the impact of climate action and carbon reduction measures on the kind of research being conducted and how operational processes supporting research activities are affected.

When asked if institutions had introduced a policy for research-related travel with a view to reducing carbon emissions (Figure 8):

- 74.4% of respondents indicated that they already have a policy in place or are planning to introduce a policy
- 25.6% responded that such a policy had not been introduced

Some respondents did not know, or this wasn't applicable to them. These responses were excluded in this analysis.

Figure 8: Have you introduced a policy for research related travel with a view to reducing carbon emissions?



The survey also asked in which areas, besides travel, respondents felt climate action was having the biggest impact on research.

The selected options were:

- The changing requirement of funders for carbon reduction actions (41.9% of institutions)
- More international funding opportunities for climate action research (37.2%)
- Collaboration with more researchers in the field to reduce travel and support capacity (16.3%)
- Other (2.3%)
- Purchasing of research equipment (2.3%)

Finally, respondents were asked if their institutions had carbon reduction measures in place when hosting international conferences.

- 54.5% do not have any measures in place
- 13.6% have such measures in place
- 31.8% indicated that they did not know or that this was not applicable

Examples of carbon reduction measures in place (free text box)

- Consideration of online conferences
- Encouraging remote participation of presenters
- Less meat-based catering
- Waste reduction and less paper usage

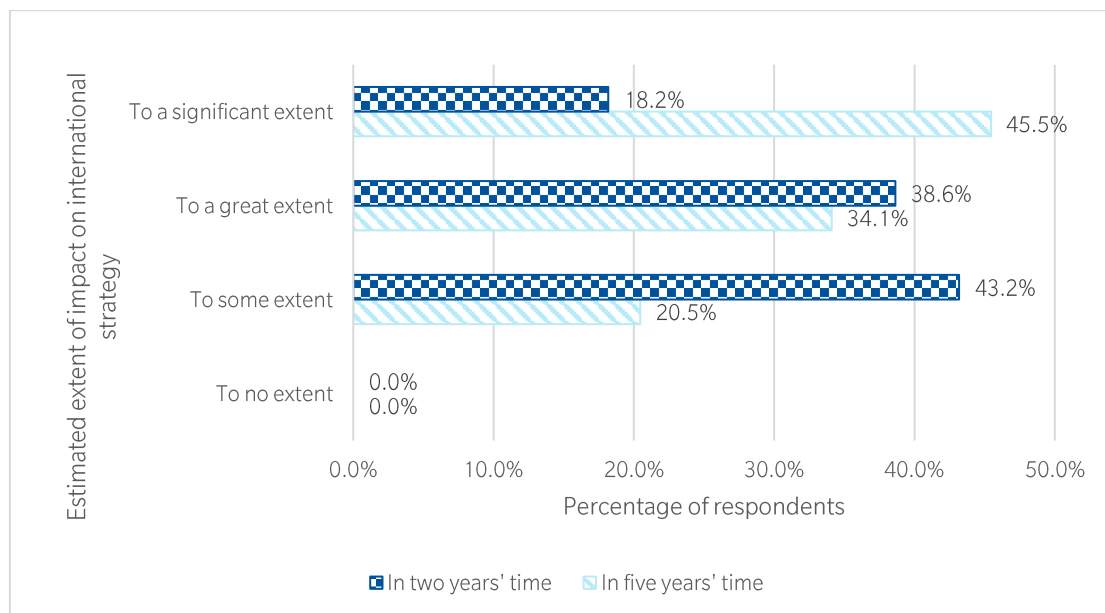
Trends

Lastly, the survey aimed to establish the direction of travel for internationalisation strategies and activities and where those responsible for international strategies envisaged future changes and impacts, and how these may change in the next two to five years.

When asked to what extent they believe climate action and carbon reduction measures will impact the delivery of their international strategy within two years or five years' time, all respondents indicated that they will be impacted (Figure 10).

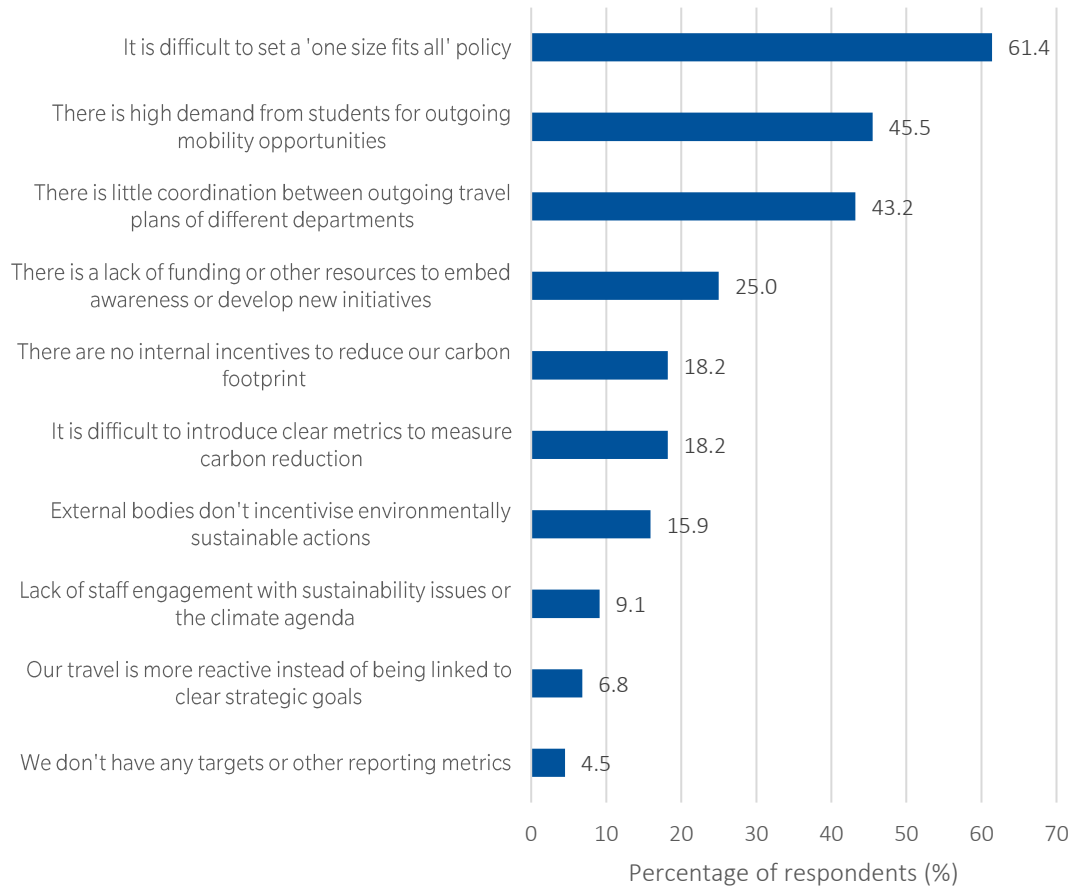
A majority of respondents (56.8%) believe their internationalisation strategies will be impacted to a significant or great extent in two years' time. This percentage rises to 79.6% of respondents who indicated that their strategies will be impacted in five years' time.

Figure 10: Estimated level of impact of climate action and carbon reduction on the delivery of international strategy in two- and five-years' time.



The survey also asked respondents what their biggest challenges are in reducing their carbon footprint with respect to their international strategies. Respondents were asked to select their top three out of a list of different options (Figure 11).

Figure 11: What do you perceive as the biggest challenges in reducing carbon footprint with respect to your international strategy?



The most commonly selected challenges were:

- It's difficult to set a 'one size fits all' policy (61.4%)
- There is high demand from students for outgoing mobility opportunities (45.5%)
- There is little coordination between outgoing travel plans of different departments (43.2%)

Themes of other challenges as listed by respondents (free text box)

- Finding the balance between reducing carbon emissions by travelling less, versus the huge benefits of in-person interactions and developing relationships
- The cost of carbon off-setting is not recognised by funders and not seen as a good standard for climate action
- There is a need for value alignments with overseas partners with a commitment to sustainability
- There is a lack of data available to understand the different impacts across different activities and to enable the setting of realistic and unified targets,

The respondents were then asked to select the top three areas of support that would help them to further advance climate-related changes in their international strategy. The majority of respondents selected 'Sharing ideas and discussing challenges with colleagues' (68.2%) and 'Advice on best practice in addressing climate change through international strategies' (65.9%). A further 50.0% indicated that national guidelines on specific aspects around carbon reduction in international higher education activities would be helpful. Over a third of respondents (38.6%) stated that they would benefit from participating in dedicated networks, working groups or round table discussions on specific topics.

Conclusions and next steps

Conclusion

The results of this survey make clear that institutions are going through a period of flux with respect to their international strategies. However, it is encouraging that the vast majority of institutions (86.3%) either already clearly link their international strategies to their sustainability strategies or are planning to do so. The importance of climate action within international strategies is only expected to grow over the next few years with 100% of respondents already reporting changes to their international activities.

The responses show that climate action or carbon reduction in internationalisation activities are not seen as isolated goals but interlinked with other strategic aims, such as making international experiences more accessible, improving the student experience at home and overseas, strengthening overseas partnerships and increasing their local impact alongside the wider Sustainable Development Goals. Climate action within international activities is therefore part of a complex cost-benefit analysis in which institutions must consider the impact of changed policies or approaches holistically. This means not only looking at a 'progress towards net zero' angle but also considering the impact of equality, diversity and inclusion on both students and staff.

Importantly, Covid-19 has accelerated the use of digital technologies to replace overseas activities such as teaching and learning, recruitment, research, and partnerships. This has consequently reduced the need for travel and contributed to discussions on which elements to keep post-pandemic.

A full return to pre-pandemic practices seems unlikely and respondents are clear that some activities will remain virtual in the future. However, the next couple of years will be crucial in highlighting how embedded this shift already is or if there will be an intention-behaviour gap once global restrictions ease and travel becomes easier again. It is notable that 97.6% of respondents say they have replaced some physical mobility with virtual mobility or are considering doing this. The benefits of virtual mobility extend beyond an institution's carbon footprint, to the access agenda and to more impactful internationalisation at home.

There is also a clear indication of a change to TNE and recruitment practices by engaging more with in-country staff for recruitment events or teaching at TNE partners and avoiding the use of flying faculty or other staff visits. Again, institutions consider these changes not only to reduce carbon emissions but also because of experienced benefits such as improved overseas student experience, closer collaboration opportunities and the chance to increase local impact.

The sector's response to climate action regarding outward mobility (student and staff travel, research, TNE and overseas recruitment) is quite unified, for example, 72.7% of

institutions have already made or are considering changes to their international student recruitment practices as a result of climate change. However, the approach institutions take on other areas is more diverse, possibly also due to diverse set-ups and practices pre-pandemic. For example, there is a near 50:50 split between institutions which have (and which haven't) changed the way they engage with their TNE partners because of the climate crisis. And for those with overseas campuses, 35% already include these as part of their overall sustainability strategy while 50% do not. The work of the recently established [Overseas Campus Network](#) and especially its sustainability working group will be crucial in developing thinking in this area.

The majority of respondents identified the lack of a 'one size fits all' response as their key challenge for carbon reduction in international activities. The many different dimensions and considerations to climate action in international activities also mean that respondents identified a strong need for peer-to-peer learning and best practice sharing around travel, digital infrastructures, objectives, and approaches. This multifaceted approach will also need to play a role in the upcoming Sustainability Strategy from the Department for Education. With a quarter of respondents highlighting a lack of funding or other resources to embed awareness or develop new initiatives, further support or incentives through the strategy would be welcome.

Another challenge reported is a lack of data from the different internationalisation activities to make informed decisions on setting targets or any agreement on how to measure the carbon impact of international activities. This is especially needed when it comes to scope 3 emissions linked to mobility where survey respondents have expressed the need for a sector-wide approach.

Next steps

This survey has highlighted a lot of positive action by institutions but also that further guidance and support would be welcome. UUKi has an important role to play in providing opportunities for members to meet and discuss the challenges they face and to consider opportunities for collaboration. Small-scale pilot projects testing methodology for international student recruitment emissions may, for example, be one way in which progress could be made.

UUKi will prioritise the following activities and work with its members to identify specific areas of focus and further support:

- Convene a small advisory group (based on the task and finish group) to identify areas or priorities for further support
- Continue to engage with sector organisations, including the EAUC, and engage with their soon-to-be set up Travel group (a sub-group of their Aligning Sector Emissions Steering Group), in particular with respect to mobility in scope 3 emissions

- Promote examples of best practice (both in the UK and internationally), including drawing on progress made by groups such as the Overseas Campus Network sustainability group. The six case studies published alongside this report form part of this activity
- Develop a toolkit or other practical resource that lists where changes could be made across the range of international activities
- Consider options for commissioning research to address gaps in knowledge or understanding to support informed, balanced and non-discriminatory decision making (for example the benefits of outward mobility at different life stages versus carbon cost, or better understanding of effective travel policies)

This survey has revealed the scale of change that is underway in institutions, driven by the twin impacts of Covid-19 and the climate crisis and shows much evidence that new working models are being considered and strategies rethought. Institutions expect the significance of this to grow considerably in the next few years. Internationalisation is fundamental, not just to the success of institutions, but also to the chance of finding solutions to the huge challenges the planet faces. Sustainable internationalisation is one of those challenges and it is through the basics of internationalisation – partnerships, collaboration and trust – that further progress will be made.

Acknowledgements

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