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Defining a blueprint for sustainable academic conferences: lessons learned from the BILETA annual conference 2024

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ABSTRACT

The use of digital technologies does not represent the panacea to organise sustainable academic conferences. Although the environmental impact of these events could be mitigated through virtual meetings, the latter would not meet the requirements of academic conferences, which are valued for networking and community building. The existing literature does not offer a coherent set of guidelines to organise sustainable academic conferences. Building on the experience of the BILETA Annual Conference 2024, this paper recontextualises the existing literature on sustainable international conferences and presents a blueprint to organise sustainable academic events. The proposed measures are organised into three groups, depending on whether these can be implemented by host institutions, conference organisers or attendees. Using mixed methods, including interviews and carbon emissions calculations, the paper aims to provide practical guidelines for sustainable academic conferences that can be potentially incorporated and generalised at the institutional level.

KEYWORDS

Academic conferences; sustainability; academic travel

1. Introduction

While in-person conferences are highly valued for networking, community-building, and personal wellness (Gottlieb 2022), they have a high environmental impact, in particular generating significant waste and contributing to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions related to academic travel (Jäckle 2021; Raby and Madden 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic was the driver of virtual conferences, facilitated by the use of videoconferencing tools (Camilleri and Camilleri 2022; Jack and Glover 2021). These types of conferences not only offer flexibility in terms of organisation and higher levels of accessibility and inclusivity, but also possess environmental benefits, as they imply limited energy consumption and do not entail waste production and significant GHG emissions related to academic travel (Tao 2021). Yet, virtual conferences did not replace in-person events as they are

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not exempt from challenges, such as technical problems and reduced social interaction (Dumbell and Haddow 2024), struggling to foster networking and engagement (Guetter 2022).

The British and Irish Law, Education and Technology Association (BILETA) is a scholarly association that organises a conference every year on a different theme. The BILETA Annual Conference 2024, hosted by Dublin City University (DCU) on 17th, 18th and 19th April 2024, was entitled 'Digital and Green: Twin Transitions?.' The authors of this paper were among the organisers of the conference. Rather than leaving this expression as a mere title of the event, efforts were made to organise 'an academic conference as sustainable as possible', leading to the identification of a series of challenges related to this endeavour. Firstly, a gap in the literature on how to organise sustainable events was identified. While numerous studies and reports focused on carbon neutrality, large international conferences (Gadsden 2024; Kitamura 2020; Mykletun, Bartkeviciute, and Puchkova 2014; Rogers and Wynn-Moylan 2022), they did not examine academic conferences in particular, which typically have a smaller scale, budget, and different objectives. Therefore, the organisation of a sustainable academic conference at DCU, which was done according to the guidelines set by the scholarship for international conferences in general, presented some drawbacks.

Building on the lessons learned from the BILETA 2024 conference, our paper aims to present a blueprint to organise sustainable academic events, providing actionable insights for future academic conferences. Offering a novel theoretical framework that builds on the existing literature, the proposed measures are organised into three groups, depending on whether these are best implemented by the host institution, the conference organisers or the attendees. This work employs mixed methods, combining the existing literature with semi-structured interviews and quantitative analysis. Given the size of the conference, which attracted 147 attendees (40 of whom attended online), our results are mostly suitable for academic conferences of around 100–200 attendees.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the existing literature on the topic and offers a theoretical mapping of the strategies to organise a sustainable academic conference, distinguishing them on the basis of the actors that are best placed for their implementation: namely, the host institution, the conference organisers and the conference attendees. The section subsequently discusses the methodology utilised in the semi-structured interviews supporting the findings of the article. The following three parts examine, respectively, three groups of measures and actions for sustainable academic conferences, based on the party best positioned for its implementation. It is important to note, however, that some measures may require involvement from multiple or all parties. General, structural measures could be put in place by host institutions (Section 3), while conference organisers are most suited to a wide range of operational tasks (Section 4). In addition, attendees' behaviour also influences conference sustainability (Section 5). For each group, general guidelines in light of the existing scholarship are provided, and their limitations or lessons learned following the experience of the BILETA conference are discussed. Our work finally considers to what extent carbon offsetting practices represent a solution to reduce the environmental impact of academic conferences (Section 6). We rely on the results of a quantitative analysis performed through online surveys and aimed at calculating the carbon emissions generated by attendees'

travel. In this part, we present in detail the methodology used and we discuss the limitations of our findings. In the last section, we conclude by stressing the need to adopt a set of concrete and actionable measures at association or institutional level in order to contribute to green the organisation of conferences, a core aspect of academic life.

2. Structuring the blueprint: literature and methodology

2.1 Shaping a theoretical framework for medium-sized conferences: actors and tasks

The organisation of the BILETA Annual Conference 2024 started in spring 2023. Once the overall theme was identified, 'Digital and Green: Twin Transitions?', the organisers decided to use the conference as a field test to go beyond what has been called 'climate hypocrisy' (Higham and Font 2020), i.e. the gap between the pro-environmental values often espoused in academic discourse and the carbon-intensive realities of international conferencing, and organise an event 'as sustainable as possible'. It was apparent from the beginning that it was not possible to organise a carbon neutral conference, but the organisers intentionally decided to keep track of their actions to document the process of organising a sustainable academic conference and discussing the results at the following BILETA Conference and through an academic paper.

As a first step, the conference organisers completed a literature review on sustainable academic conferences and engaged with relevant stakeholders to understand whether sets of good practices, models or guidelines were in place at institutional level in order to ensure the organisation of a sustainable academic conference. Some authors focused on international, non-academic conferences (Gadsden 2024; Kitamura 2020; Mykletun, Bartkeviciute, and Puchkova 2014; Rogers and Wynn-Moylan 2022) or significantly larger academic events, such as leading academic congresses with more than 1000 attendees (Gadsden 2024). Other scholars explored the pros and cons of in-person academic conferences versus virtual conferences, the latter regarded as a paradigm to reduce carbon emissions (Jäckle 2021; Kinakh 2021). Greenhouse emissions generated by academic travel were indeed identified as the main environmental drawback of in-person academic conferences (Neugebauer 2020; van Ewijk and Hoekman 2021). Some papers analysed more broadly the sustainability challenges of academic conferences (Bertella and Castriotta 2024; Brohus, Bootman, and Bultynck 2024; Funke and Lago 2022) and reflected on the actions taken to address these issues (Obexer 2023; Parncutt 2021), but they did not propose a comprehensive set of guidelines to organise sustainable academic conferences.

In this context, our paper aims to address this gap by providing an assessment of the experience of organising a medium-sized (ca. 100 attendees) academic conference in a sustainable way and by offering a blueprint of guidelines that might be adopted at the institutional level. Absent an established theoretical model of guidelines for the organisation of sustainable academic conferences, we propose to structure our blueprint according to a division of tasks among three main categories of actors: host institutions, conference organisers and attendees. Figure 1 below visualises the areas of commitment of each actor.

Host institutions are best equipped to develop a strategic plan: sustainability cannot be achieved for single academic events only, but has to be conceived as a continued effort.

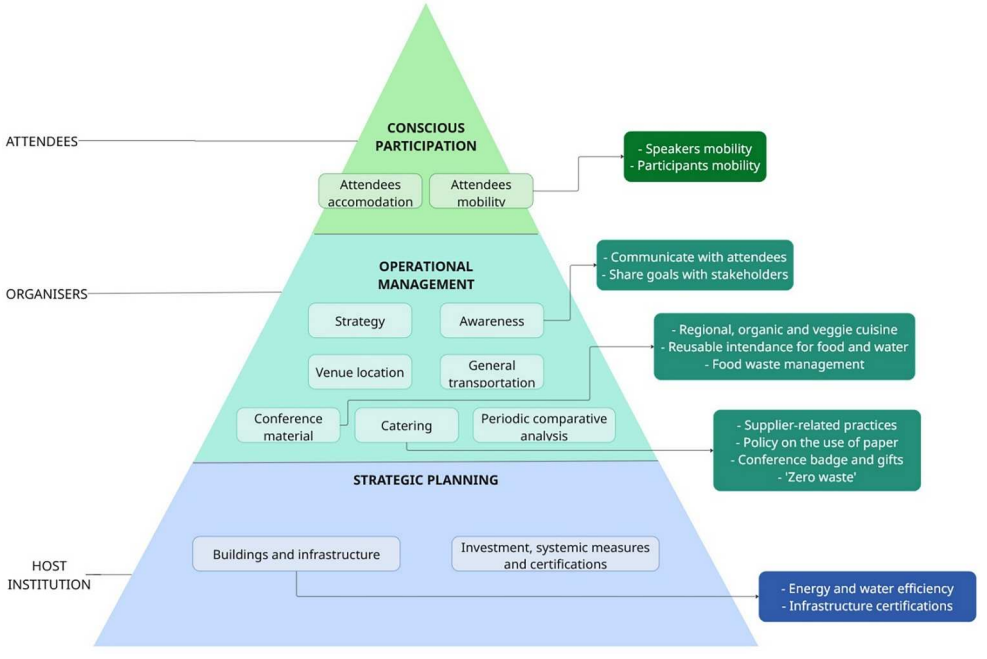

Figure 1. Types of actions for sustainable academic conferences according to the subject best placed for its implementation.

From a temporal point of view, the role of host institutions spans a wider time period that precedes and follows the organisation of the specific academic event in question. From a substantive point of view, these actions tackle structural issues that could not be effectively addressed by the conference organisers in a limited amount of time, but require a broader and bolder institutional commitment.

Conference organisers are best positioned to manage the operational aspects of an academic conference. Building on the structural strategic measures put in place by host institutions, they have the capability to ensure the effective sustainability of an academic event. The range of their functions is broad, but the timeframe of their action is limited to the period of organisation of the specific academic event.

Conference attendees are not exempt from expectations as travel to the conference venue and the choice of accommodation have a significant environmental impact. What we call 'conscious participation' to academic conferences depends on choices made ahead of the academic event. However, beyond the participation in a single conference, responsible choices made by conference participants in a consistent way throughout a series of academic events can have more long-lasting and significant effects on the environment.

2.2 Building on the BILETA conference's experience: interviews' methodology

In order to complement our findings resulting from the analysis of the literature, we performed mixed method empirical analysis involving the participants to the BILETA Annual Conference 2024. Such analysis consisted of semi-structured interviews with

conference attendees and a quantitative analysis of carbon emissions generated by attendees' travel and calculated on the basis of information provided via an online survey embedded in the conference registration process. The findings of this quantitative analysis will specifically support our discussion related to the advantages and limitations of carbon offsetting in Section 6; consequently, its methodology is discussed in detail in that part, while this section aims to focus on how semi-structured interviews are performed.

After the end of the Annual Conference, we carried out six semi-structured interviews with a representative sample of conference attendees. Our focus was to achieve a sufficient level of representativeness in the poll of interviewees in order to reflect the varied nature of BILETA conference attendees. The main limitation of this strategy lies in the small number of participants, despite them being selected to provide a representative sample of different academic status and gender. As a result, the findings of this empirical research are intended to serve a qualitative complement to our broader investigation.

Regarding the sampling strategy, interviewees were selected from the BILETA Annual Conference 2024 publicly available programme, by using stratified sampling. The sample was identified taking the first individual appearing in the conference programme and applying each of the criteria below, in this order:

- Profession / career stage: we selected 1 non-academic; 1 master's student, 1 PhD student, 1 assistant professor, 1 associate professor, and 1 full professor;
- Gender: 3 males and 3 females interviewees.
- Geographical origin: host institutions/home universities from 6 different countries.

During the interviews, participants were asked to answer questions in relation to their own experience at the BILETA conference, their commitment to sustainability in their professional lives, and their views on sustainable academic conferences more specifically (see Appendix 1 for the full list of questions). The main goal was to capture the experiences and perspectives of conference attendees, offering insights into the diverse sensitivities of academics to sustainability issues.

3. Host institutions: strategic planning and practices

Host institutions play a substantial role in fostering sustainability of academic events. Adapting existing infrastructures to suit the specific sustainability needs of individual conferences is not feasible or practical. Host institutions are thus most apt to manage what we call 'strategic planning and practices'. With this expression we refer to the structural logistics of academic events and longer-term tasks for sustainability and accessibility. The analysis of the existing literature shows that host institutions' commitments can be identified in two areas: venue sustainability (3.1), and certifications, systemic measures and structural investments (3.2). The experience gained through the organisation of the BILETA Annual Conference 2024 reveals that, despite significant planning effort from host institutions, it is equally important to provide concrete frameworks and guidelines to help organise sustainable academic events (3.3).

3.1 Venue sustainability: energy and water efficiency

Medium-sized academic conferences of up to 200 attendees often take place in university buildings. The overall sustainability of these buildings depends on strategic planning and practices of host institutions and requires significant and continuous investment. Energy and water efficiency are at the core of university venues' sustainability (Draper, Dawson, and Casey 2011) and may be regarded as structural measures as they have the potential to benefit multiple conferences, not to mention other academic activities held in the same premises.

Enhancing buildings' energy efficiency represents a key strategy to enhance the sustainability of university premises (Fissi 2021). Comprehensive energy management programmes can be developed to reduce electricity consumption and third-party energy audits can help identify areas where energy savings can be made (Draper, Dawson, and Casey 2011). It is recommended to prioritise the switch to energy-efficient compact fluorescent lighting or any other type of bulbs that are deemed more efficient (Draper, Dawson, and Casey 2011; UNEP 2012). In relation to heating, programmable thermostats and motion sensors can be installed in guest rooms and public spaces to regulate heating and cooling efficiently (Draper, Dawson, and Casey 2011). Contracting energy tariffs that prioritise renewable energy may also be considered ('Net Impact Approaches – 2018 Conference "Bringing the strands together", 2018). During the conference, host institutions may also play a role in relation to energy efficiency, since they may be able to influence the average indoor temperature of the venue by efficiently managing ventilation and air conditioning (Ranacher and Pröbstl-Haider 2014).

In relation to water, institutions can implement conservation measures focused on saving water by reducing its usage. For instance, high-quality and water-efficient devices, such as flush-stop buttons, dual-flush systems and greywater for irrigation purposes, can be installed for toilets and faucets (Draper, Dawson, and Casey 2011; UNFCCC 2018). At the same time, institutions can also provide convenient and eco-friendly ways to distribute water, reducing the need for single-use plastic bottles and encouraging refillable options. Thus, it would be best to locate water dispensers conveniently throughout the university site.

3.2 Certifications, systemic measures and structural investments

Obtaining certifications on buildings' energy and water efficiency might be a practical way to ensure that academic events organised in these premises align with high sustainability standards (Zotova 2020). Some of the most relevant certifications that can be obtained by academic institutions are the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) rating system and the Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) (see, e.g. Università Ca' Foscari 2025; University College London 2022). More generally, the European Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS), which supports organisations in enhancing their environmental performance, is a more encompassing recognition that host institutions could consider. In relation to the organisation of events, it is possible to obtain the certification ISO 20121:2024 'Event sustainability management systems – Requirements with guidance for use' (ISO 20121).

However, the reliance on such certifications is not without its critics. Scholars have noted that certifications can sometimes function as a form of 'symbolic' compliance, where the focus shifts towards fulfilling procedural requirements rather than achieving substantive environmental improvements (Bennett 2022; Nolan 2018). Because many of these schemes are partially self-administered or rely on periodic social audits, they may fail to capture the day-to-day operational realities of an institution's sustainability (Meemken 2021). While these benchmarks remain a pragmatic tool for universities, they should be viewed as a starting point for accountability rather than a definitive guarantee of holistic sustainability.

Certifications are certainly part of more comprehensive, systemic measures to enhance sustainability that can be implemented at the institutional level. Other examples include establishing consistent frameworks that can guide academics on how to organise sustainable academic events and devoting a budget for green initiatives. Another way to improve an organisation's sustainability performance is to provide comprehensive environmental training to employees, covering a broad range of issues and educating them about existing sustainability initiatives (Whitfield, Svobodova, and Webber 2022). All of these measures require structural investments not only in financial terms, but also in relation to staff training and awareness.

3.3 From plans to practices: towards an increased capillarity of institutional actions

Over the past few years, the BILETA Annual Conference 2024's host organisation, DCU, has significantly invested in sustainability matters, as is shown in its 2021 Sustainability Charter,[1] the 'Climate Action Plan 2021-2026' and the 'DCU Climate Action Roadmap' in response to the National Climate Action Plan 2021, which are updated yearly. DCU has a sustainability manager and two reports on sustainability and carbon footprint, respectively, that are published yearly (Dublin City University 2022b). In the last few editions, DCU has scored consistently high in terms of sustainability in leading international rankings (Dublin City University 2023)[2] and has been awarded the 'Green-Campus Ireland' status for all its academic campuses by An Taisce, an Irish NGO active in the environmental and cultural heritage field (Dublin City University 2022a).

In our interviews, most respondents stressed that more responsibility should be taken at the institutional level, especially considering the 'macro impact' of institutional actions (Participant 4) and highlighting general issues that cannot be solved by conference organisers alone. The latter noted the absence of concrete guidelines and established practices on how to organise sustainable academic conferences. Interviewees also pointed out issues in relation to public procurement rules, which may hamper the organisers' efforts, arguing that 'at least there need not be hurdles to people wanting to organise more sustainable conferences' (Participant 2). However, one respondent was reluctant as to whether it was practically possible for universities to change their established practices in this area in order to be more environmentally sustainable.

These observations show the existence of different levels of actions to achieve sustainability in academic events. Host institutions might excel in adopting good practices in terms of venue sustainability and overall management, but they may lack institutional guidelines to organise academic events or might not sufficiently foster general awareness

in this area. This exposes the importance of ensuring a sufficient degree of 'capillarity' of institutional actions. Integrating general commitments and best practices enhances sustainability across all university activities, including when supporting the organisation of academic events.

4. Conference organisers: operational management and coordination

Conference organisers do not have the capacity to affect structural sustainability choices of the host institutions, but they are well-positioned for a wide range of actions related to the 'operational management and coordination' of the conference that can have a significant impact on the overall sustainability of the event. They are de facto the actors that, in the absence of strict policies enforced by the host institutions, can decide to what extent to adhere to sustainable conference organisation standards. In an effort to systematise the existing scholarship, we identified three main operational management and coordination areas affecting sustainability that conference organisers are most capable of: advance planning, awareness raising and reporting (4.1), choice of venue and promotion of eco-friendly transportation options (4.2), and choice of conference materials and catering (4.3). Each of these domains offers organisers the opportunity to customise their sustainability efforts based on budgetary limitations and specific event requirements, providing flexibility. In light of these guidelines derived from the existing scholarship, in the last section we will reflect on our achievements and limitations in light of the experience of organisation of the BILETA Annual Conference 2024 (4.4). In particular, we will highlight that more efforts have still to be done in terms of raising awareness among the academic community about sustainability initiatives.

4.1 Planning, awareness and reporting: disseminating sustainability ambitions

To organise a sustainable academic conference, meticulous planning and strategic groundwork are required well before the event (UNEP 2012). In the absence of established institutional guidelines on how to organise sustainable academic conferences, organisers would need to commit significant time to identify conference delivery mode, venue and travel, material and catering solutions that reduce environmental impact. These decisions are not always straightforward and often require the conference organisers to engage with local businesses, which are not necessarily already among the university suppliers, to check the availability of accommodation solutions with environmental certifications, sustainable catering options and recyclable conference materials, just to mention the main examples.

The ultimate willingness to engage in sustainable practices during a conference is influenced by each individual's perception of the organisation's commitment to sustainability. This does not involve merely raising awareness of conference participants, but also of stakeholders and employees, and in all cases well before the event (Cugniere 2020; Jung 2016).

Best practices suggest that all stakeholders involved, such as host institutions, sponsors, partners, venue owners and managers, hotels, suppliers, the local community, employees, relevant NGOs and the media, are identified before the event. It would be ideal to communicate sustainability goals clearly and promptly to them, so that they

can adapt and align with the conference strategies as well as suggest more tailored solutions. Providing insights into existing sustainability challenges can also help stakeholders understand the importance of their involvement (UNEP 2012).

It would be advisable to inform participants about any environmental measures implemented in the context of the academic conference, including information about the reasons behind them and its impact (Zotova 2020). This is possible even with limited resources, and using existing event-related tools, such as conference websites, call for papers, programmes, or on-stage announcements (UNEP 2012). Participants could also be engaged by being asked to sign a declaration committing to adopt sustainable travel solutions, reducing energy and material consumption, recycling, and learning more about sustainable practices (Albano and Appel 2017), creating a mandatory code of conduct that all attendees accept upon registration (Cugniere 2020), or creating quizzes and prices, mini-education centres, or field visits to local social projects (UNEP 2012).

The impact of sustainable conference practices relies heavily on the dissemination of continuous and final reporting by the conference organisers. Information about sustainable options, material usage, disposal methods, travel-related impact, and stakeholder engagement could be collected into sustainability reports. They enable not only checking the compliance with the sustainability practices set by the organisers, but also promoting further awareness about the environmental impact of academic conferences and potential mitigation solutions (Santos 2022; Williams 2021). Such reports can also include the results obtained in surveys exploring attendees' perceptions during the conference (Ranacher and Pröbstl-Haider 2014).

4.2 Venue and transportation: the sustainability vs inclusivity dilemma

Conference organisers might have the ability to identify the location and venue of their academic event. This usually applies to conferences co-organised by multiple institutions, scholarly associations or hosted by a single institution having the ability to choose among various campuses or venues. Reconstructing the existing scholarship, the choice of a conference location and venue to promote sustainability can be based on three criteria: travel distance, accessibility and the environmental policies of the venue itself. First, where applicable, the conference country and city that minimise travel distance and environmental impact can be selected (Klöwer 2020; van Ewijk and Hoekman 2021). To identify eco-friendly meeting locations, one can use the Travel Carbon Footprint Calculator[3] (Barrett" 2020). This tool helps shortlist potential cities by analysing the travel carbon footprint of anticipated attendees, thereby pinpointing climate-conscious options (Epp 2022).

Second, it is advisable to select an area that is easily accessible to most participants, either through direct flights or by a combination of public transportation (Zotova 2020). Tools such as the ICAO calculator[4] can assist in selecting the most accessible location by evaluating the travel origins and distances of all attendees. When it comes to the venue, it is important to choose a location that is conveniently accessible by public transportation from the airport and main train stations. Third, the venue's policies on environmental matters help reduce the impact that the conference might have (Brohus, Bootman, and Bultynck 2024). That includes the choices made in relation to catering, waste management, water management or energy efficiency, among others

(ibid.). Though these policies provide strong evidence for the sustainability of a given venue, they may additionally be supported by environmental certifications (Zotova 2020).

Travelling to the conference venue – especially air travel – is one of the main adverse environmental factors generated by academic conferences (van Ewijk and Hoekman 2021). This aspect will be explored in more detail when discussing the role of conference attendees. However, conference organisers play an important role in disseminating the sustainability ambitions of a specific academic event and they can provide information about sustainable travel options to the conference location or about the environmental impact of available transportation solutions.

Best practice suggests that organisers play a more incisive role to provide attendees with comprehensive information about local transportation options, i.e. to help participants reach the conference venues once already in the area where the event takes place. It is advisable to discourage individual transportation options, such as car or van rentals, due to their adverse environmental impacts. Instead, participants may be urged to opt for public transportation methods, like buses, trams, metros, regional trains, or even walking and cycling (Williams 2021; Zotova 2020). Discounts on public transport could be offered, a strategy that has already proved successful (UNEP 2012). Regarding cycling, participants could take advantage of bicycles provided by local bike-sharing programs, which may even offer a determinate time of use at no charge (Williams 2021), and host institutions could promote a bike-friendly workplace by providing amenities such as secure bike storage systems or shower facilities (ASU 2016). Furthermore, carpooling could be facilitated by setting up a carpool board at the host institution, and coaches could be arranged to transport participants to conference dinner venues (Ma 2020). In all these cases, it is essential to provide conference attendees with a clear overview of local transportation options.

The choice of sustainable venues and transportation solutions shall not hinder other goals. Inclusivity and diversity, as well as venue accessibility, need to be upheld (Sarabipour 2020). First, inclusivity and diversity call for a better representation of minorities – particularly LGBTQ + individuals, scholars from unrepresented or remote regions of the world and different ethnicities –, and balanced representation of speakers across genders (Rossier, Miya, and Rockwe 2021; Wu 2022). It is advisable to take into account work-life reconciliation, so that any family or other caring commitments are balanced and it is ensured that they are not discriminated against (Sirgy and Lee 2018). Second, venue accessibility allows individuals with disabilities to participate in the event (Sarabipour 2020). These aspects may go hand in hand with sustainability goals, and certain types of conferences may be more suited to achieve both. For example, hybrid conferences are more environmentally sustainable (Zotova 2020) and tend to be more inclusive, enabling researchers who face barriers such as work-life balance, financial, accessibility, or other limitations to participate without the need for travel (Puccinelli 2022; Wu 2022).

The interaction between sustainability and representation requires careful navigation to avoid 'green' barriers to entry. For instance, while reducing long-haul travel is a primary environmental goal, a rigid 'no-fly' policy in these cases or high carbon-offsetting fees could disproportionately exclude scholars from remote regions of the world or those with limited institutional funding (Sarabipour 2020). To mitigate this, specific considerations must include the strategic selection of conference venues that minimise the total travel distance for the majority of diverse participants (Klöwer 2020; van Ewijk and

Hoekman 2021). By centring the needs of underrepresented groups in the sustainability design, organisers can ensure that environmental targets do not inadvertently reinforce existing academic inequalities.

4.3 Conference materials and catering: the problem of waste

The production of waste is one of the main detrimental effects to the environment generated by academic conferences. The two main elements producing waste are materials distributed and used during the conference, and food and drinks.

A zero-waste event implies a commitment to ensure that all material used and disposed of is either reusable, recyclable or compostable, and it can serve as a powerful educational platform. Uhrin et al. considered that 'zero waste is a *process* defined by a spectrum of actions bookended by no reduction whatsoever and the generation of absolutely no waste. […] 100% zero waste is very difficult to achieve; thus, deciding where on the spectrum you wish to land and being comfortable with that target is paramount' (2021, p. 3; authors' emphasis). Incorporating zero waste principles into the initial design phase enables a significant shift in resource consumption.

Firstly, choosing environmentally committed suppliers – regardless of whether they hold formal sustainability certifications – can help conference organisers address these issues in the absence of more established institutional practices. Cugniere et al. recommend that suppliers enter into a sustainability agreement and are encouraged to share information about sustainability initiatives (2020). Suppliers could also be asked to provide minimal packaging so that waste is minimised (Zotova 2020). Choosing local and small businesses as event suppliers also supports the local economy and fosters community involvement (UNEP 2012).

Secondly, the adoption of a 're-use' policy can also enhance sustainability. This includes acquiring recycled or repurposed materials (ASU 2016), reusing materials from previous events (Zotova 2020), or donating them to charities or local theatre groups afterwards (Albano and Appel 2017). Reusable items such as linens, dishes, cutlery, and metal straws (Whitfield, Svobodova, and Webber 2022), eco-friendly products like low VOC paints (Draper, Dawson, and Casey 2011), non-toxic cleaning agents (UNEP 2012), and paper-based banners instead of those made from foam board or vinyl (Ma 2020) shall be encouraged.

Thirdly, best practice suggests that the use of paper, particularly coloured paper, should be minimised during the conference, and the circulation of information online, such as conference programmes, updates and news, should be promoted (Al-Sharari et al. 2016; Hagen 2021). Participants may be encouraged to print only essential documents (UNFCCC 2018). When using paper, recycled or post-consumer paper is preferred (Ranacher and Pröbstl-Haider 2014), avoiding chlorine-bleached paper and opting for certified products (ASU 2016; UNEP 2012). Double-sided printing with a readable font size is recommended, and single-sided printed paper can be collected for reuse (UNFCCC 2018). Communication can be streamlined through the use of a mobile application (Ma 2020), and Poken devices, which are NFC USB business cards that allow gathering information from other conference participants and exhibitors, may be provided to participants (UNFCCC 2018). While these digital tools significantly reduce physical waste, it should be acknowledged that they carry their own – often less visible – environmental costs

related to server energy use, data storage, and the lifecycle of the electronic devices employed.

Fourthly, it is possible to redesign conference badges to eliminate single-use plastics. An example of that is a foldable badge made from recycled paper, with additional functions such as a pocket to insert drink and vote tickets (Williams 2021). If plastic badges are nonetheless used, attendees may be encouraged to return them at the end of the conference (Ranacher and Pröbstl-Haider 2014). Regarding gifts, organisers can prioritise the needs of attendees by assessing the necessity of items and conducting surveys to identify useful giveaways for future conferences (Lapolla 2018). It is recommended to eliminate donated or free memorabilia, limit merchandise to one souvenir item per attendee, provide edible handouts such as chocolate, or practical and reusable items such as tote bags and USBs, and donate surplus gifts to charity (Albano and Appel 2017; Williams 2021; Zotova 2020).

Lastly, but certainly not least, to support effective recycling initiatives, organisers can use educational posters that instruct attendees on proper waste sorting (UNFCCC 2018). In this regard, some have argued that on-site recycling programmes for paper, cardboard, metals, glass, plastics and organic materials for composting are a critical step in minimising waste (Draper, Dawson, and Casey 2011).

Besides waste generated by materials distributed and used during the conference, food and food waste have been identified as significant environmental issues (Al-Sharari et al. 2016). The literature suggests that fish-based, vegan, and vegetarian diets have lower emissions compared to high meat consumption diets, and that sourcing local ingredients is also important (Ma 2020; Williams 2021). Sustainable cuisine may include vegetarian, organic, local, and seasonal options (Iflazoglu and Can 2025). Various proportions for balancing local, organic, and vegetarian food have been proposed (Cugniere 2020; UNFCCC 2018). In addition, it is recommended that on-site information about the climate impact of food choices is displayed (UNFCCC 2018).[5]

It would be beneficial to avoid disposable cutlery (Zotova 2020), and when selecting food cutlery materials, options such as porcelain and bamboo could be considered since they have a lower environmental impact (Albano and Appel 2017; Chan and To 2006). The same principle can be applied to drinking utensils. However, best practice suggests evaluating the trade-offs between reusable glassware and single-use materials, which depend on factors like the venue's capacity limits (Williams 2021). In addition, attendees might be encouraged to bring their own mugs or cups for conference coffee breaks or this might well represent the memorabilia provided at the beginning of the conference (Ma 2020).

Managing food waste involves two main strategies. First, minimising waste generation. This involves measures such as evaluating the amount of food required to avoid excessive leftovers or minimising plate sizes to encourage attendees to take only what they can consume (Ma 2020; Zotova 2020). Second, implementing measures to repurpose any unavoidable waste. For example, surplus food can be given to local food redistribution organisations or directly donated to charities or other events scheduled directly afterwards and sent for composting (Al-Sharari et al. 2016; Ma 2020; Zotova 2020).

4.4 Ad hoc plans, limited awareness and strong support

The organisers of the BILETA Annual Conference 2024 did not dispose of institutional guidelines for the organisation of sustainable academic conferences, nor of sustainability analysis to monitor and compare the conference's ecological footprint with previous conference editions. In order to prepare the conference sustainability strategy, an initial literature review was conducted, which revealed the importance of engaging with stakeholders. The host institution sustainability team was contacted; the conference organisation support team was made aware of the organisers' objectives. The organisers' ambitions were disseminated through the conference website, and details were included in the call for papers. The sustainability objectives of the conference were highlighted during the conference as well. Nonetheless, the results of our interviews show that efforts in this direction may not have been sufficient. Indeed, most respondents were not aware that organisers aimed to organise a more sustainable event before attending the conference. All interviewees acknowledging the organisers' efforts attended in person, while interviewees who were not aware of the conference's sustainability ambitions attended online. This may be due to more emphasis being put on sustainability during the event itself.

The host institution has three campuses located in the northern part of Dublin city. The St Patrick's campus was chosen due to its location near accommodation options and its better connection in terms of public transportation to the airport and the city centre, when compared with the Glasnevin campus, where the School of Law was located. In our interviews, respondents often cited convenience factors such as shorter travel time or lower costs. In particular, they considered it important to have a direct flight connection to the conference location. The issue of good connection of the conference venue to the airport and the city centre was generally considered less important by respondents. All respondents viewed the use of public transport positively. Some mentioned that the introduction of discounts for conference attendees would not be their primary reason for using public transport, though they could be effective if used as an incentive. One participant emphasised the importance of providing clear information on public transport, including visual aids, as many attendees avoid it due to the challenge of navigating unfamiliar systems. Most respondents also supported the use of bike services, noting benefits like fostering informal interactions (e.g. group bike rides). However, these services depend on weather, urban infrastructure, personal abilities or conditions. Carpooling options were considered as being difficult to put into practice given that many attendees were uncomfortable navigating an unfamiliar city with unknown peers.

In relation to waste reduction strategies, one of the more relevant measures adopted by the organisers was eliminating any printed programmes or flyers; everything was provided online via the conference website or was available in a mobile-optimised format on the conference abstract management platform. Badges were made of recycled cardboard from cereal boxes; lanyards were reused from previous conferences and no gifts were made. No single-use plastic items were used.

Regarding participants' perceptions, our respondents expressed a positive view of the measures implemented. Our interviewees considered the reduction of paper use during conferences as a positive measure. In particular, they supported the substitution of paper with digital options (e.g. a digital repository of papers), since it may also be more

convenient and practical. A suggestion was to offer attendees the option, prior to the conference, to request a printed version of the conference programme or opt out. However, one respondent acknowledged that the objective of academic conferences (i.e. engaging intellectually) should be kept in mind, and that the different needs of participants should be considered. In this sense, a study demonstrated the advantage of paper-based reading over digital reading, whereby the second results in lower comprehension of the text (Delgado 2018).

Reducing plastic use during the conference was one of the most supported measures in our interviews. Our survey shows that academics support the use of no-plastic or reusable plastic badges, limiting the number of gifts (if any), and avoiding the unnecessary use of materials. Notwithstanding, one respondent acknowledged the significant role of merchandise in our society. However, the participant agreed with the fact that the items provided could be aligned with sustainability efforts.

The organisation of a sustainable catering service represented one of the most demanding and time-consuming challenges. University catering and nearby restaurants capable of accommodating around 100 guests did not provide menus oriented toward sustainability concerns or sustainable catering options, such as compostable cutlery and glass bottles. The organisers had to agree on a series of ad hoc sustainable measures with the caterer. In particular, a local menu was identified and the use of plastic bottles and cutlery was banned, opting for water jars, wooden cutlery for lunches and coffee breaks and metal cutlery for the conference dinner. This effort suggests the need for universities and local businesses to consider the introduction of sustainable options and 'packages'. Training of employees is also important. Indeed, during one of the days of the conference, an attendee alerted the catering staff that no water was available and, prompted by this report, the staff brought plastic bottles of water, despite the agreement not to use them.

Food and food waste were identified as significant issues by our interviewees too. In our survey, while most respondents agreed that local and seasonal food should be promoted – highlighting benefits like supporting the local economy – they expressed concerns about these food options. Vegetarian options are not always welcomed, since they may be seen as non-appealing and exclusive options: in this regard, a study in the UK demonstrated that this perception hinders acceptability and discourages catering changes (Graham 2020), and there is scepticism surrounding the sustainability of organic, biological, or even local, food. One respondent stressed the need to address and correct misconceptions about these food types.

Our survey showed that participants at academic conferences agree with measures put in place in relation to sustainable cutlery and on-site waste recycling. One respondent claimed that it should be a priority, while another argued that disposable cutlery does not present any advantage. Some claimed that non-disposable cutlery is also the preferred option on a personal level. Most respondents also believed that attendees should bring their own water bottles. However, one participant highlighted that there may be reasons for not bringing one (e.g. travelling and limited luggage space), suggesting that attendees should have the option to obtain one at the conference venue. Similarly, another interviewee noted, 'not everybody walks around with a [refillable] water bottle' (Participant 6).

5. Conference attendees: conscious behaviour and sustainable participation

The success of a sustainable conference is not only dependent on the strategic decisions taken by the organisers but can also be significantly affected by the choices made by conference attendees. In general, the effectiveness of all the sustainability measures discussed in the previous sections relies on the responsible participation by conference attendees. We speak of a sustainable 'conscious behaviour': participants' goodwill to contribute to the sustainability measures implemented by the host institution and the organisers. The latter range from waste reduction and recycling to energy-saving practices, by switching off lights, ventilation, and ICT equipment when not in use (UNFCCC 2018). On top of the actions discussed above, concrete sustainable participation actions by conference attendees are key to reducing the environmental impact of academic events. In particular, sustainable travel and accommodation choices are two areas where conference attendees can make a substantial contribution (5.1). However, the experience of the BILETA Annual Conference 2024 shows how, despite a good level of sustainability awareness and commitment, time and cost constraints often limit attendees' possibilities to contribute to the sustainability of an academic event (5.2).

5.1 Sustainable participation: balancing in-person and virtual participation

The conference modality – in-person, virtual, multi-venue (video conferences connecting multiple locations) and hybrid conferences (Rossier, Miya, and Rockwe 2021) – influences the environmental impact of attendees' mobility. While the in-person aspect of academic conferences is crucial for research, its carbon footprint must be weighed to find a balance. Hybrid conferences are technically complex, but they can reduce carbon footprint by two thirds (Tao 2021) – while maintaining relevant personal interactions (Raven 2023; Zotova 2020). Some authors bet on a more significant use of digital tools such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) or holograms in the future of hybrid conferences (Hagen 2021).

Virtual participation has the lowest environmental impact – the carbon footprint could be reduced by 94% (Tao 2021) – being also advantageous in terms of cost-effectiveness, ease of attendance, and accessibility (Williams 2021). It may be preferred when attendees are due to travel for a reduced number of days to a remote destination or if they have already generated significant carbon emissions due to academic travel in a given period. It would be important for each academic to map their academic travel over time in order to make responsible choices for each conference. Indeed, conference attendees flying intercontinentally emit between 2 and 5 tonnes of CO_2, which exceeds the annual limit of 2.3 tonnes per person required to curb climate change (Zotova 2020). In this regard, Higham and Font argue that academics are 'highly aeromobile', which can be seen as a form of 'climate hypocrisy' and requires collective action (2020). A case study shows that the environmental impact would be significantly reduced if a small percentage of long-haul flight attendees participated online (Klöwer 2020). Concerns have also been raised about non-sustainable 'academic tourism' practices, stressing that conference travel where the primary value is perceived as social or recreational rather than purely intellectual or scientific should not be legitimised by means of the added social value of in-person events (Höllerer and Geiger 2022).

In case of in-person attendance, although efforts can be made by conference organisers to provide information about eco-friendly transportation options, attendees are ultimately responsible for determining how they travel to the conference location and how they get around during the event. There is a consolidated body of scholarship analysing the impact of each transportation system, the most sustainable options being the train and other electric public transportation vehicles (Ben-Ari et al. 2024; European Environment Agency 2021; Jäckle 2022; Ritchie 2023). In the next section, we will analyse the carbon emissions generated by participants to travel to the BILETA Annual Conference 2024 in order to provide a concrete example of the environmental impact of an academic event of a similar size.

Last, but not least, choosing accommodation options near the venue can significantly reduce the need for on-site transportation (Al-Sharari et al. 2016). Likewise, hotels that have obtained a general environmental certificate (e.g. EMAS, Hotel Carbon Measurement Initiative) or other certifications (e.g. Green Key, LEED, Green Globe, EarthCheck) may be prioritised (Zotova 2020). It would be good to receive a list of recommended sustainable accommodation options from the conference organisers, but it is also possible to find databases of eco-certified accommodations online.[6]

5.2 Beyond awareness: time and cost constraints

BILETA Annual Conference 2024 organisers provided conference attendees with comprehensive information about sustainable participation options. More specifically, information regarding how to get to Ireland via train or ferry was added on the conference website. The event was designed in a concentrated way, with all the panels and the social events taking place in the proximity of the venue with a maximum walking distance of five minutes. The venue of the conference was identified due to its proximity to hotels with environmental certifications. Specific information about sustainable accommodation options was provided, and attendees were encouraged to consider them. Lastly, before and during the conference, attendees were encouraged to use public transport, if they wanted to visit the city centre or travel from and to the airport.

Our interviews show a widespread commitment among researchers to be more environmentally sustainable in their professional lives, including both conducting research on sustainability and reducing individual environmental footprints. However, despite such a level of awareness, this does not always translate into concrete actions. One respondent admitted not giving environmental sustainability 'the priority that it should have just yet' (Participant 6), citing pragmatic factors – such as international research and time constraints – and structural issues – lack of social pressure.

Interviewees agreed that academic conferences are generally not sustainable and that universities should take more responsibility. Sustainability in academia should be 'an absolute top priority' (Participant 3). However, some participants noted that most conferences are already making efforts to be more sustainable, while another argued that academic conferences are relatively sustainable due to the high level of awareness within the academic community. Two respondents were sceptical about the potential impact of changes in academic conferences on global sustainability. One interviewee also emphasised that while reflecting on improvements is important, sustainability should not challenge the fundamental role of academic conferences, as they are 'an important part of

[researchers'] work' (Participant 1). These responses highlight the tension between academic objectives and environmental sustainability ambitions.

Our empirical analysis reveals that mobility is a sensitive topic for attendees. While recognising the tension between environmental impact and personal interactions, most agreed on the need to make academic travel more sustainable. Some suggested that combining event formats could be beneficial, and most considered hybrid conferences as a good alternative. They argued that hybrid participation also made academic conferences more accessible, since participants who would otherwise face barriers – such as financial constraints, caregiving duties, or geographical distance – could now attend remotely. Our interviewees recognised that, while hybrid participation entails technical challenges, the benefits outweigh these issues. Regarding making connections, one respondent noted that networks can also be built regionally – i.e. avoiding air travel and privileging regional transportation modes, such as local trains – though this may require more time. However, others were more hesitant about virtual conferences, with one participant stating that flying can be 'totally acceptable', given that academics typically attend only a few conferences per year (Participant 1).

Concerns in relation to unrepresented or remote regions of the world, often located in the Global South, were also highlighted. Some see virtual and hybrid conferences as a way to increase accessibility for people from these regions as they provide valuable opportunities to engage in networking and scientific events at reduced costs. Other interviewees argue that this is not the case, since in-person conferences offer a more enriching experience and are more suitable to strengthen connections. One respondent noted that sustainability measures could inadvertently penalise those in more disadvantaged economic or social positions, for instance by increasing the cost of conference fees to cover the use of more expensive recycled materials or local food.

According to our interviewees, the main environmental concern related to the organisation of sustainable academic conferences is represented by the carbon emissions generated by attendees' travel. Our interviews show that, when deciding on transportation options, other factors – time and cost constraints, ease and convenience of air travel – may be more relevant than the environmental impact. Most respondents highlighted catering-related (food, waste, utensils, etc.) and general waste issues (mainly paper and promotional items). There was less consensus on the issue of finding sustainable accommodation options: one participant considered environmentally friendly accommodation a key issue, while another argued that providing such options may not be necessary. Our interviewees considered energy-saving practices as a measure to be encouraged among conference attendees. However, one participant was reluctant about their actual impact, given that smart buildings already switch off the lights automatically. Additionally, it was noted that for conference attendees it may be difficult to implement energy saving practices related to building lighting and air-conditioning, as most participants are not part of the host institution.

6. Carbon offsetting: part of the solution?

Carbon offsetting mechanisms consist of estimating greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions released in relation to an event – e.g. for participants travelling from and to the venue – and purchasing GHG credits to offset these emissions.[7] Conference organisers can

use a share of the event budget to buy GHG credits or encourage attendees to do that by, for instance, including a fee in the registration process or directly purchasing credits when buying plane tickets (Williams 2021).

At first sight, they could be seen as a comprehensive solution to the problem of sustainability of academic conferences. GHG emissions generated by the conference would be offset through a specific action. However, this might end up creating a vicious circle; it is therefore recommended to minimise GHG emissions first. Moreover, the use of offsetting mechanisms is controversial, due to their dubious effectiveness in reducing and removing GHG emissions (Mendelsohn, Litan, and Fleming 2021). Part of the scholarship also highlighted ethical concerns related to their impact on local communities and developing countries, given that most of the offsetting programmes are implemented in those areas (Antoniazzi 2023; Magnetti, Dominioni, and Gordijn 2025).

The organisers of the BILETA Annual Conference 2024 carried out a survey to calculate the approximate GHG emissions related to attendees' travel and explored options to offset this carbon footprint. The next sections will illustrate the methodology and results of the survey (6.1) and will discuss carbon offsetting options and their limitations, providing a series of recommendations for the organisation of future events (6.2).

6.1 The conference survey: the impact of long-haul fights

The BILETA Annual Conference 2024 organisers asked attendees to complete a survey when registering for the conference. Participants were asked to answer the following two questions: (1) 'From which city will you travel to the BILETA conference?' and (2) 'How are you planning to travel to the BILETA conference?'. The survey was completed by 101 attendees out of 147 attending in person, and we were able to process 97 forms in total, due to the lack of some basic information. To ensure consistency, all responses were standardised and normalised in a table, as follows: City names were standardised to the format *city, country* (e.g. Dublin, Ireland). Synonymous terms or variations in phrasing, such as 'flight' or 'plane,' were unified under a single, consistent term (in this case, 'plane'). Therefore, the results included the following six transportation modes: 'Bus', 'Train', 'Plane', 'Car', 'Walk', 'Ferry', or a combination of them (e.g. 'Train, Plane'). For responses mentioning both plane and other forms of transportation, only the primary mode 'Plane' was recorded, with an exception for cases involving a regional train (medium distance), which was categorised as 'Train, Plane'. While it is recognised that medium-distance trips by car can be significantly more polluting, the reason for not considering them is largely due to the challenge of calculating emissions from other forms of private or public transportation. We lack precise data for these alternatives (for example, the emissions from a bus or taxi ride to the airport would vary greatly depending on the participant's home address). After standardisation, responses were grouped by transportation mode (e.g. all 'Plane' responses together) to enable clearer comparisons. The carbon footprint of attendees' travel to the conference was calculated in CO_2 Equivalent (CO_2EQ), considering the round trip.

For each transportation mode group, carbon emissions were calculated separately, and different methods were used as follows:

- Group 1 (Plane), Group 2 (Train) and Group 3 (Train, Plane): Emissions were calculated using the *Travel footprint calculator*.[8] We assumed that all attendees travelled in Economy class. For Group 3, estimations were calculated by configuring the tool to include only train trips with distances below 300 km (around 5 h by train).
- Group 4 (Train, Ferry): Two methods were combined. First, the carbon footprint of the journey by train was calculated with the *Travel footprint calculator*. Second, the carbon footprint of the journey by ferry was calculated using the UK Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) conversion factors 2024, assuming that attendees were foot passengers.[9]
- Group 5 (Bus): DEFRA Conversion factors 2024 were used, assuming an average distance of 6 km from the centre of Dublin to the conference site.
- Group 6 (Car): Calculated by using the DEFRA conversion factors 2024, car size 'medium'. For travels within Dublin, an average distance of 6 km was likewise assumed. We also assumed that respondents did not share the car.
- Group 7 (Walk): No calculation required.

The total carbon emissions related to attendees travelling to the BILETA Annual Conference 2024 amount to 41.52 CO_2EQ tons. Figure 2 visualises the carbon emissions generated by each group and their calculation method. Our results show that most carbon emissions come from attendees travelling by plane. While representing around 74% of the conference participants, they amount to more than 97% of the total CO_2EQ. Although this result might show a general preference for travel by plane, it may also be explained by the fact that the conference was located on an island.

As represented in Figure 3, which compares the tons of CO_2 emitted by each member of Group 1, nearly 7 tons of CO_2EQ out of 40.3 tons are attributed to a single overseas journey from Hong Kong to Dublin. This is followed by another journey from Kuala Lumpur responsible for about 4 tons, while an additional 4 tons result from the combined emissions of 11 attendees. Avoiding longer distances could thus significantly reduce the conference's environmental impact. Participants might be encouraged to attend multiple events and make the most of their travel.

	Number of attendees	Methodology	Carbon Emissions (CO_2EQ)
Group 1 (Plane)	72	Travel footprint calculator	40.3 tons
Group 2 (Train)	4	Travel footprint calculator	38.3 kg
Group 3 (Train, Plane)	4	Travel footprint calculator	1.1 tons
Group 4 (Train, Ferry)	3	Travel footprint calculator, DEFRA conversion factors 2024	50.2 kg
Group 5 (Bus)	7	DEFRA conversion factors 2024	9.1 kg
Group 6 (Car)	5	DEFRA conversion factors 2024	16.47 kg
Group 7 (Walk)	2	N/A	0
	Total: 97		**Total: 41.52 tons**

Figure 2. Carbon footprint according to transport groups.

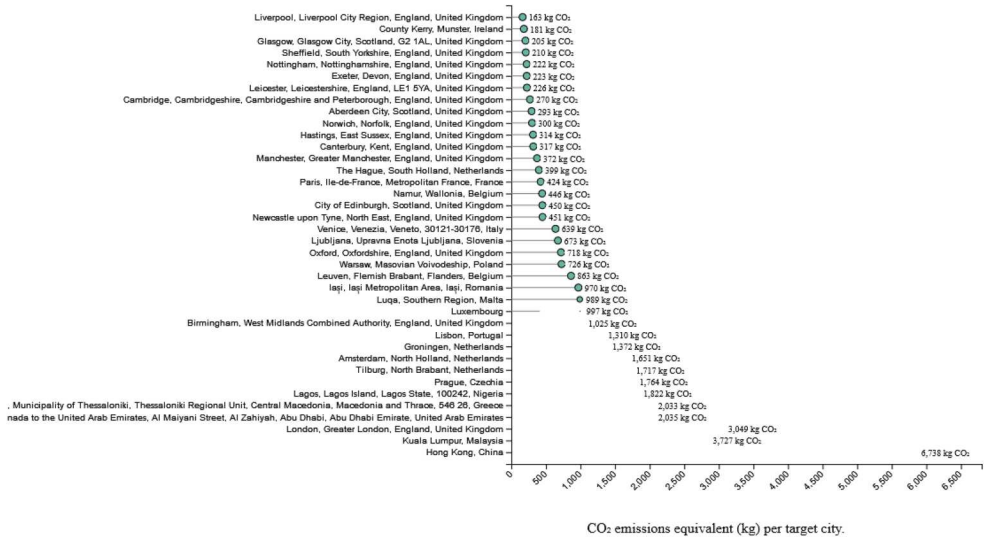

Figure 3. Travel Carbon Footprint Plot for Group 1 (Plane). Plot elaborated using the Travel footprint calculator (https://travel-footprint-calculator.irap.omp.eu/).

6.2 Calculation limitations and lack of local offsetting mechanisms

The organisers of the BILETA Annual Conference 2024 intended to use the results of the survey calculating the carbon emissions of conference attendees to explore potential carbon offsetting options. The limitations of the carbon emission calculation methods used were apparent. The results of the survey completed at the time of registration by conference attendees only provided an approximation, but they did not fully represent the actual emissions of the conference. On the one hand, they did not consider non-travel carbon emissions. On the other hand, not all attendees responded to the survey, and the open-ended nature of its questions led to variations in detail and accuracy, limiting the organisers' ability to calculate precise emissions for each journey.

However, despite these limitations, we consider this exercise of calculating conference attendees' carbon emissions an important one in order to raise awareness among the academic community about the impact of professional travel. In light of the BILETA Annual Conference 2024's experience, we thus suggest designing survey questions that prompt participants to give more detailed answers about the means of transportation used, the presence of connections, and the distance of travel in case of use of cars or buses. At the same time, there is a potential trade-off between the granularity of information and respondents' willingness to respond: the longer the questionnaire, the more attendees will not be willing to respond to it, or they will respond less attentively.

In our interviews, participants revealed different perspectives on carbon offsetting mechanisms. While an interviewee argued that offsetting should be mandatory, another considered that 'we should not even think of upsetting offset [mechanisms], we should just stop [generating carbon emissions]' (Participant 3). Another interviewee expressed concerns about the feasibility of compensating for carbon emissions, noting that the cost could be so high that it might make hosting academic conferences

economically unviable. Last, one respondent acknowledged that it could stigmatise participants travelling from greater distances.

The identification of potential carbon offsetting programmes was not straightforward. The hosting institution did not have any carbon offsetting partner or local plan. Sponsors who could contribute to funding carbon offsetting initiatives were actively sought, but none were identified. No institutional procedure was in place to spend part of the conference budget for offsetting purposes. Most of the offsetting programmes found did not involve local partners, but only Global South stakeholders, without the possibility to verify a tangible impact of the budget spent on purchasing carbon offsetting. Discussions at the level of host institution were carried out on the possibility of planting trees on one of the DCU campuses. This choice was considered to be impractical. The carbon sequestration power of a tree depends on several factors (Muukkonen 2007; Nowak 2013), and there are different models to calculate it (Nowak 2008). Using the 'MyTree' tool,[10] we calculated the carbon dioxide uptake over 20 years of a young English oak (*Quercus robur*) of 2.5 cm diameter, in excellent condition, located in Dublin with partial sun exposure. The results show an approximate carbon dioxide uptake of 445.22 kg CO_2EQ. Therefore, it would be possible to offset the 41.52 CO_2EQ tonnes related to the BILETA conference within 20 years by planting approximately 95 trees, which represents approximately one tree per attendee. Unfortunately, none of the host institutions' campuses has sufficient space for 95 new trees.

Although carbon offsetting mechanisms were not finally implemented, our research showed the importance of establishing trusted carbon offsetting partners at the institutional level. As the implementation of local offsetting might be impractical, host institutions or scholarly associations could identify offsetting programmes and establish guidelines that facilitate carbon compensation by conference organisers.

7. Conclusion

The organisation of sustainable academic conferences still represents an underexplored issue. The experience of organising the BILETA Annual Conference 2024 exposed the lack of specific scholarship as well as guidelines and established practices at the institutional level. The interviews performed after the event demonstrated a scarce level of awareness among researchers about sustainability problems related to academic conferences. While this was explicitly acknowledged by some of the interviewees, their overall attitude towards this topic was positive, pledging their curiosity to reflect on matters they had not considered before. Although certain sustainability measures in the 2024 BILETA Annual Conference yielded limited results, they succeeded significantly in increasing general awareness. Indeed, enhancing the involvement of conference attendees in implementing sustainability measures in the context of academic conferences is key to reducing the environmental impact of these events.

Although academic conferences have a direct negative impact on the environment, there are several options available for organising them in a more sustainable way. Most of the measures are in the hands of the conference organisers – what we refer to in this paper as *operational management and coordination measures*. They can be regrouped into three areas: (1) ensuring advance planning of a sustainability strategy, raising awareness among involved stakeholders and ensuring adequate continuous reporting, (2)

identifying an accessible venue that allows for green mobility and promoting eco-friendly transportation options, and (3) opting for environmentally responsible conference materials and catering. In this paper, we also analysed the adoption of carbon offsetting practices, concluding that for their effective implementation, the identification of trusted partners and established guidelines at the institutional level is recommended.

Indeed, despite the flexibility and autonomy of conference organisers, some of the measures to be adopted to organise a sustainable academic conference are in the hands of the host institution, which could implement them beforehand – what in this paper we called *strategic planning and practices*. Investing in the sustainability of university venues, obtaining environmental certifications, training employees, and ensuring continued investments in fostering green practices represent responsibilities of host institutions that are characterised by a systemic nature. They cannot be implemented for specific academic events, but require an *ex ante*, structural commitment. Moreover, our research exposed the difficulties that conference organisers encounter when promoting sustainability measures in the absence of established guidelines at institutional level, as is apparent in the case of identifying a trusted carbon offsetting partner. Our findings therefore stress the importance of systemically promoting sustainability practices through the introduction of institutional policies for the organisation of academic events.

Last, but not least, the overall sustainability of the conference ultimately depends on the individual choices taken by attendees, here conceptualised as *conscious behaviour and sustainable participation*. Identifying sustainable accommodation options and using eco-friendly local transportation options are measures that can be easily implemented if conference organisers provide sufficient information ahead of the conference. Yet academic travel remains one of the main negative factors affecting the sustainability of academic conferences. As demonstrated in our calculation of the carbon emissions generated by the travel of BILETA Annual Conference 2024 attendees, long-haul flights are those with the highest environmental impact. While in-person networking is key to academic life, researchers may devote more care in planning their annual professional travel, privileging virtual participation or reducing conference participation in case of attendance to events in remote locations. Attendees can represent a driver of change in their respective institutions, advocating for the local adoption of offsetting programmes and the establishment of green practices in the organisation of academic events.

The BILETA Annual Conference 2024 experience shows that many commitments are shared, and it is thus important for host institutions, organisers and attendees to move in consonance. We hope that this paper represents a further step towards the greening of future BILETA conferences, and the establishment of sustainability guidelines by academic institutions and other scholarly associations.

Notes

1. This document is available at https://www.dcu.ie/sustainability/dcu-sustainability-charter.
2. DCU scored in the top 200 universities in the world in the QS World University Rankings: Sustainability for 2023, 2024, and 2025, see https://www.topuniversities.com/sustainability-rankings/2024?search=Dublin%20city%20university.
3. Available at https://travel-footprint-calculator.irap.omp.eu/home.html.

4. Available at http://www.icao.int/environmental-protection/Pages/Tools.aspx.
5. A playful CO2 calculator to compare the carbon footprint of different ingredients and menus is available at https://game.klimagourmet.de..
6. For example, at https://ecohotels.com.
7. GHG credits are units that normally correspond to one tonne of GHG emissions. These units are created through voluntary actions to mitigate climate change.
8. Available at https://travel-footprint-calculator.irap.omp.eu/.
9. Published by the UK Government and the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and available at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/greenhouse-gas-reporting-conversion-factors-2024..
10. Available at https://www.itreetools.org/tools.

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Appendix

Interview questions

A. Own personal experience at the BILETA annual conference 2024

1. Were you aware of the efforts to make the BILETA Annual Conference 2024 more environmentally sustainable?
2. Did you consider making your trip more sustainable in line with the efforts of the conference? If this was not possible, can you explain why?
3. Did you notice any changes during the conference? For each of them, do you consider them positive or negative?
4. Do you think the changes made could have an impact on environmental sustainability?
5. What do you think could have been done better in terms of sustainability?

B. Personal commitment to sustainability

6. Would you say that being more environmentally sustainable in your professional activity is important to you?
7. Would you make any efforts to be more sustainable in attending academic events?
8. Do you decide which academic conferences you go to based on the distance between your location and the venue of the conference?
9. On a scale of 1–5, what importance do you give to each of the following elements in your decisions on academic conferences: (1: 'Not important'; 2: 'Slightly important'; 3: 'Moderately important'; 4: 'Important'; 5: 'Very important'):
10. Distance between my place of residence and the venue of the conference: _____
11. Expected time of travel between my place of residence and the venue: _____
12. There is a train connection between my place of residence and the venue: _____

13. The venue is near a train station: ____
14. There is a direct flight connection between my place of residence and the venue: ____
15. The venue is near an airport: ____
16. The location that is accessible by public transportation from the airport and main train stations: ____
17. No plastic will be used during the conference: ____
18. The conference venue provides sustainable food and drinks: ____
19. The conference organisers are committed to making a sustainable conference: ____
20. I will give you some examples of measures that aim to enhance sustainability during an academic conference. Could you tell me if you agree to the following? Why or why not?
21. Using public transport during the conference if the organisers provide a discount
22. Using carpooling or coaches during the conference
23. Using a free-bike service
24. Participating in waste reduction and separation (e.g. recycling during the conference, using glass instead of plastic, etc.)
25. Play an active role in energy management (e.g. commit to switch off lights, ICT equipment when not used, etc.)
26. Use reusable water bottles
27. Agree on not to distribute paper materials
28. Eliminate donated or free memorabilia, limit merchandise to one souvenir item per attendee, and provide edible handouts such as chocolate
29. Returning your plastic badge for it to be reused
30. Providing sustainable catering, including vegetarian, organic, local, and seasonal options
31. Avoiding disposable cutlery, bringing your own reusable mugs
32. Having speakers give their talks online if they live far away from the location
33. Doing a part of the conference online, and another part on-site
34. The adoption of a multi-venue strategy, where the conference is hosted simultaneously across different interconnected venues
35. The conference only suggests accommodation options that have an environmental certificate
36. The conference calculates the carbon footprint related to attendees' travel and devotes part of the conference income to offset carbon emissions
37. The conference identifies sponsors that financially contribute to carbon offsetting programmes to compensate carbon emissions generated by attendees' travel

C. Views on sustainable academic conferences

38. Do you think that academic conferences are generally sustainable? Why or why not?
39. Do you think that universities should take responsibility for being more environmentally sustainable in terms of conference attendance and organisation? Why or why not?
40. Which aspects of conferences are most problematic from an environmental perspective?
41. What do you think could be done to tackle these issues?
42. Do you think that allowing people to attend an academic conference remotely will increase the level of sustainability of the event? Why or why not?
43. Which digital tools or solutions do you think would help increase the level of sustainability of a conference?
44. Do you think that the increased commitment by universities to sustainability (and in particular in the context of academic conferences) is a form of greenwashing?
45. Is there any other suggestion you would like to make?