



Academic researchers' perceptions of climate action in UK universities: A briefing for the university sector

Key messages:

- **Researchers want to take climate action.** Almost all researchers want to do more in their roles to address climate change. The majority also think universities and research councils have a high responsibility to act, with many who think university action is currently insufficient.
- **Researchers think research culture, processes and guidance need to change.** Most researchers think funding processes do not incentivise low-carbon approaches to research and their university does not provide them with information about how to conduct low-carbon research. A majority also think the research culture of universities needs to change to address climate change generally.
- **Researchers need support in overcoming multiple barriers to taking climate action.** Key barriers relate to personal knowledge (uncertainty about what actions to take) and cultural and practical issues (high workload, lack of power). Barriers are differentiated by subject areas and career stages.
- **The barriers can be overcome in multiple ways.** Researchers would address climate change through their roles if they knew what actions to take, had more institutional support and greater capacity. They have insights and practical suggestions about how to move forward that are untapped by universities.



Introduction

This briefing is intended as a resource for all those working in the university sector.

Interest in the relationship between the activities of universities and action on climate change is growing, becoming particularly prominent towards the end of the 2010s, with several universities declaring climate emergencies. While there has been some progress in the sector such as widespread fossil fuel divestment, until recently there has been little focus on the critical role of researchers, particularly regarding how research practices and culture can enable or inhibit change. Action to address climate change needs to focus on how researchers work, not only the content of their research.

To build a greater understanding of this, we conducted a UK-wide representative survey of university researchers to explore:

- Researchers' perceptions of the measures that universities take to tackle their own emissions (e.g. knowledge of university initiatives, perceived responsibility)
- Researchers' own engagement on issues surrounding the climate crisis (e.g. worry, advocacy, perceived relevance to their subject area and research role)
- Challenges and opportunities for researchers to contribute to university climate action (covering personal, cultural and practical issues)

Read the full findings in the journal article:

[Wanting to be part of change but feeling overworked and disempowered: Researchers' perceptions of climate action in UK universities](#)

Research methods

These findings are from a representative online survey conducted in summer 2022. Responses were received from 1,853 researchers across 127 universities in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales – covering 79% of the total number of UK universities. Over 5,000 open text responses were also received. Respondents are a mix of early, mid and senior career researchers. Most (65%) do not research or teach on climate change, and the mix of disciplines is largely reflective of the UK Higher Education sector. Some survey questions were kept deliberately broad (e.g. 'address climate change') and will have been interpreted in different ways by respondents. However, they allow for conclusions to be drawn about researchers' views.

Climate action

Almost all (94.8%) researchers are extremely, very or somewhat worried about climate change and almost all (95.5%) want to do more on climate change in their university, though fewer want to do so specifically through their role.

They also think the sector needs to act. 82.3% think universities have a high responsibility for addressing climate change, along with research councils (74.7%). Almost half think their universities are not doing enough on climate change with regard to research activities (45%) and the university's own impacts and emissions (48.4%). There are also concerns around lip service or greenwashing.

Research culture, processes and guidance

66.2% of researchers think their university does not provide them with information about how to conduct their research in a low-carbon way, compared to 16.9% who feel it does. There is a similar perception towards funding. 54.7% think funding processes do not incentivise low-carbon approaches to research compared to 14.8% who think they do.

The results show high support (63.8%) for changing the research culture of universities to better address climate change; only 16.2% feel it does not need to change.



Barriers

Researchers face multiple barriers to doing more on climate change in their universities:



Other key barriers are inflexible university processes, pressure to travel, lack of staff expertise and lack of institutional support.

There are different barriers across subject areas and career stages. Climate researchers are more than twice as likely to feel they know how to address the topic and almost three times more likely to think their work can positively address it compared to non-climate researchers. A notable result is that medicine, health and life sciences researchers do not think their subject area is as relevant for addressing climate change compared to those in other disciplines.

Early and mid-career researchers face a lack of agency or power to take climate action, a lack of materials/resources and too much professional risk. Early-career researchers lack institutional support, have a lack of climate projects and are uncertain about what actions to take, whereas a high workload is faced more by mid-career researchers.

How to overcome barriers to climate action

Researchers have insights and practical suggestions about how universities can support them to address climate change in their research practices (e.g. slow travel policies) and how they can do so themselves (e.g. resist pressure for excessive international travel). However, their wealth of ideas, particularly where they differ between subject areas, is currently untapped. Overall, the most popular enablers for researchers to be able to take climate action through their roles are:



Other enablers include more funding for climate-related research, more climate projects, greater agency or power, and different university processes.

Recommendations

1) Knowledge and institutional culture: Help researchers understand how to engage in climate action in universities, as well as creating the culture and conditions for them to do so

- Understand that researchers want to take climate action in universities, both within and outside of their roles.
- Provide researchers with more knowledge about what climate actions they can take. They need institutional support to implement actions and allocated time within their roles for them to do so.
- Institutional support and actions should not be taken purely through sustainability teams. While this could be enacted through institutional climate action plans, funding bodies and university leadership should also consider how wider processes can facilitate researchers to act.
- Address the barriers and incentives that researchers face. For example, travel is a central part of research culture and pressure to travel is a barrier to climate action.
- Improve institutional climate action and increase researchers' awareness of this, ensuring responsibility to act is not shifted to researchers.

2) Targeted solutions: Provide tailored engagement and solutions for researchers at different career stages and in different subject areas

- Enable researchers to better understand how to address the climate crisis in their research practices in a relevant way for their subject areas and career stages. Ensure that universities make appropriate changes and offer relevant support.
- For example, efforts should be made to reduce the gap between climate and non-climate researchers so that those not working in climate change feel better able to contribute their own expertise. Involvement from different types of researchers will allow for different ideas and forms of engagement, both within and outside of universities.

Further reading

References/Further reading:

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