High Flying Business Schools: Working Together to Address the Impact of Management Education and Research on Climate Change

Michael J. Gill
University of Oxford

INTRODUCTION

As I write, highly civilized human beings are flying overhead, slowly changing our climate. We flyers are ‘only doing our job’, travelling abroad to attend a conference, for work or study. Nonetheless, the aviation sector is estimated to contribute to 2 per cent of the world’s annual CO₂ emissions and this number is set to increase, making air travel a significant source of climate change (Terrenoire et al., 2019). If climate change continues unabated, it is expected to lead to more extreme weather events, such as floods, storms, heat waves and droughts. This change is likely to impact many lives, for example by leading to animal extinctions as well as more malaria and malnutrition around the world (Endo et al., 2017).

In my own field of management and organisation studies, climate change has been identified as ‘one of the greatest challenges we confront in the 21st century’ (Howard-Grenville et al., 2014, p. 615). I have seen first-hand how business schools have made considerable progress in reducing their impact on the environment. Yet there is much more that could be done, beyond individual academics or business schools. Air travel is a prime example. There are established practices at the core of business education and research that encourage a dependence on international flights, and thus impact on climate change, but which remain largely unchallenged. For instance, I use international travel to attend conferences or conduct research. I teach hundreds of international students each year who fly to attend business school.
I have increasingly struggled to reconcile these practices with our knowledge of human driven climate change. Climate change affects the poorest first and worst while being driven by some of the wealthiest countries, institutions and people. Taking a long-haul flight typically generates more carbon emissions than the average person, in many countries, produces in a whole year (BBC, 2019). I have contributed to climate change by working in a system of business education that relies on such travel. I am not alone in these feelings as demonstrated across a range of personal and institutional blogs. Colleagues and students have also expressed to me a desire to do things differently to protect our climate.

I have heard colleagues respond that business schools and their faculty can educate students who are or will become managers in organizations on the threats of climate change, helping them to reflect on and address their organizations’ impact on the environment. I agree, though I believe that our teaching can be more persuasive if we embrace for ourselves the changes we ask of others. Furthermore, if we attempted to alter our own use of flying, we would gain first-hand experience of the problems and opportunities that many professions face in addressing climate change. Such efforts could generate a variety of research projects and insights to support our teaching, such as why people may embrace or resist new approaches to international travel as well as the unintended consequences of these approaches.

In this essay, I draw on my personal experiences to examine the reasons for business schools’ dependence on international flights. I argue that this dependence is deeply rooted in both the practices of business schools and the identities of business school faculty. This is due to professional norms of conference attendance, the elite image of business schools and an apparent absence of green alternatives. I will also outline three proposals that seek to evolve rather than eradicate existing practices: alternate the academy, create carbon costs and give green grades. My proposals do not seek to prohibit flying or conference attendance but to challenge the largely unfettered use of air travel while promoting new opportunities for collaboration with researchers and students. As such, my proposals blend with existing practices to offer suggestions that can begin to address the norms that sustain ‘high flying’ business schools’ reliance on international flights.

**ALTERNATE THE ACADEMY**

Addressing climate change requires us to alter many of the norms that we have internalised. For instance, attendance at international conferences, and thus typically the use of international flights, is a powerful norm within business schools. Conferences are important events through which to develop research papers into journal articles – the key metric of academic success. Attendance is a common and expected occurrence. Colleagues ask questions that include ‘are you going to the academy?’, ‘have you submitted a paper for the summer?’. I have found conferences to be valuable, having met co-authors, received feedback on my research and gained insights into the publication process through attendance. I have also found attendees to be welcoming and supportive, and I have made new
friends or met existing ones. There are tremendous upsides for academics who attend international conferences.

The centrality of international conferences is nevertheless problematic in the context of climate change. Some researchers like those in the OS4future movement have demonstrated the potential to use trains and public transport, which have a far smaller impact on the environment than air travel. The possibility of these forms of transport is often limited by the location of conferences. The most well-attended conference for management scholars is the Academy of Management annual meeting. In 2018, 11,010 people, from 90 countries travelled to Chicago, USA to attend. I was among them. Reflecting an international community, more than half of attendees travelled from outside North America (Academy of Management, 2018). It is reasonable to assume, then, that this conference prompted thousands of long-haul flights. This is problematic because an economy-class return flight from London to New York emits the equivalent of 11 per cent of the average annual emissions for someone in the UK or about the same as those caused by someone living in Ghana (BBC, 2019). While I am using the academy of management annual meeting to illustrate the relationship between conferences and international flights, it could equally apply to any of the many international conferences.

So, how can we protect the climate while also attending valuable conferences? I propose that we alternate, each year, between the physical academy of management annual meeting and a virtual meeting. Alternating would signal our collective commitment to addressing climate change and would expedite the slow implementation of virtual conference technology. This could be further accelerated by incentivising virtual attendance through a lower conference fee for digital participation. Virtual conferences are already utilised across multiple fields of research. At the time of writing, the European Group for Organizational Studies (EGOS) Colloquium is expected to be completely virtual due to the Coronavirus pandemic sweeping the world. Virtual hosting would incur financial costs and necessitate considerable planning, particularly for the first few years of alternating. These could be offset by smaller venue requirements and a reallocation of resources from physical to virtual conference planning. The digital technology that underpins virtual conferences is not, however, a panacea. Different institutions and parts of the world have varying degrees of access to the necessary technologies for virtual participation. Video streaming also generates greenhouse gas emissions, albeit less than air travel for the duration of a conference. We should therefore continue to assess how different conference formats yield both solutions and problems for our communities as well as the climate.

Critics of this proposal may argue that virtual conferences will only be adopted partially or temporarily. Yet this fails to appreciate the symbolic power of role modelling change for other conference organisers and attendees. Sceptics may also respond that virtual conferences can never simulate the effectiveness of their physical counterparts, particularly in terms of the informal interactions, and thus similar numbers of attendees will continue to attend the physical conferences. I believe that once virtual conferences have been shown to be a viable means of participation, they will be an attractive alternative to many people. For example, those who do not want to be denied many of the positive opportunities of conferences but also seek to address climate change, or have family responsibilities, or difficulties with travel. Moreover, it would also facilitate the
participation of researchers who are unable to afford international travel. Alternating the academy is a catalyst to hasten the introduction of a blended physical/virtual approach to conferences that progress us away from the simple dichotomy of ‘fly to attend’ or ‘do not attend’.

CREATE CARBON COSTS

Addressing climate change requires many schools and scholars to surrender some social status. Business schools vie for higher and more prestigious positions on global rankings in the Financial Times, the Economist and other outlets. Accruing such status offers a range of rewards, such as attracting the best faculty and students from around the world. There are parallels between business schools and other firms in this regard, both of whom seek to acquire or produce a product or service that is ‘in demand’. In the competitive marketplace of business schools, academic institutions are unlikely to cede sources of recognition.

I have observed that while the pursuit of prestige does not necessitate the use of international flights it encourages such behaviour. International travel is bound up with notions of being in demand. For example, scholars are invited to fly to research institutions to share their impactful research that typically features in elite journals. Funding bodies award prestigious grants to a small set of scholars and often provide financial support for international travel to facilitate the conduct or communication of their research. Successful business schools, themselves, afford research budgets to support travel. International flights for research purposes are therefore more than an easy way to reach many people or simply an established practice. They are also status symbols as international travel outside of conference attendance is often used by dynamic academics who are well published, have won competitive research grants or who are employed by a successful institution with sizeable budgets.

I propose that we develop mechanisms across our institutions to begin to disentangle the close connection between international travel and status. More specifically, I suggest a mandatory quota system in which all staff are budgeted a certain number of carbon emissions and, by extension, a certain number of flights. Underlying this proposal is the idea that there should be a carbon price; a cost to carbon emissions that should be borne by emitters. One mechanism to implement quotas and establish a carbon price is through an emission trading system. This system – also known as a cap-and-trade system – sets a limit (‘cap’) on total carbon emissions and allocates or sells associated carbon quotas. This then forms the basis of a market where the rights to emit (through a carbon quota) are traded. Over time, the carbon cap would decline to reduce total emissions. A cap-and-trade system would allow researchers to buy or sell parts of their carbon budget back to a marketplace, which would offer a flexible approach to the reduction of carbon emissions while financially penalizing those who exceed their quota. To develop an understanding of such a system, business schools and their wider academic institutions could join current networks of organizations already involved in such activities, such as the Carbon Pricing Leadership Coalition (CPLC). The CPLC’s current membership spans governments, private sector firms, and NGOs, as well as several universities.
Working within a coalition could lay the foundation for schools and universities to develop their own cap-and-trade system. While implementing such a system would not be easy, it would be less complex for a coalition of universities than for the various national governments, states, cities and industries who have already paved the way.

Any cap and trade system will be imperfect. Power asymmetries between schools, and the nations they are situated within, are likely to shape and persist within such a system. It is therefore essential that a system is developed collaboratively across participating institutions to enhance fairness. Critics may argue that only a small number of schools may participate in such a system without enforcement. Yet pricing carbon is likely to be viewed increasingly favourably by a range of influential stakeholders, from governments to students and the organizations that accredit schools. For example, a core value of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) is social responsibility. Participation can become a source of status while also supporting the reduction of carbon emissions. A carbon quota would encourage academics to be more discerning in their use of air travel, at the very least choosing more fuel-efficient aircraft. It could foster multi-purpose international travel. For example, collecting data, as well as running a seminar in close proximity. More optimistically, my proposal would inspire international research projects that involve other scholars and institutions who already work in the geographic area of the study. Some may view the search for potential collaborators in different countries as unduly expensive or slow. Such collaboration, though, is likely to appeal to journal editors and research funders as it could broaden the perspectives on the phenomena of study. The involvement of different collaborators, particularly those already situated near the site of study, would be likely to add to rather than detract from the value of a research project.

GIVE GREEN GRADES

The initiative to address climate change will have to come from all levels, embracing a variety of stakeholders. My essay has, thus far, failed to discuss students directly. I draw on my experience in British business schools to focus this discussion. It has been an honour to work with students from around the world. In the classroom, I have seen first-hand how students gain exposure to different ways of thinking and opinions by sharing their varied experiences within culturally and geographically diverse groups. I, too, have studied abroad and found it to be enriching. International students are also the lifeblood of many academic institutions, particularly business schools, and any reduction in attendance would likely erode revenue as well as the breadth of classroom exchanges. Furthermore, any challenges to the admission of international students would be unfair, as they would penalise people based on their geography.

The tens of thousands of business academics attending conferences each year pales in comparison to the hundreds of thousands of international students attending business schools. In the United Kingdom, 458,490 foreign students were attending university in 2019. Approximately 25 per cent of these studied ‘Business & Administrative studies’ – the most popular subject (Study-in-UK, 2019). This is merely for the United Kingdom. For many higher education institutions, international students’ travel represents a
substantial and growing impact on the environment (Shields, 2019). Addressing the impact of travelling students appears antithetical to the existence of business schools.

Yet several students have been forthright with me in their desire to support the attempts of business schools to address climate change. My proposal therefore incorporates students’ awareness and desire for engagement in two aspects. A first aspect is for faculty and students, together, to encourage leading news outlets such as the Financial Times, Economist, Business Week and US News to include environmental metrics in existing rankings of business schools. Many outlets already provide corporate social responsibility rankings, which are calculated through measures such as the proportion of teaching hours from core courses dedicated to CSR, ethics, social and environmental issues. There is thus an opportunity to develop the metrics of such rankings over time, to include the use of international flights and associated remedial action. For instance, we could draw on existing green rankings such as those developed by Newsweek to measure US companies’ environmental impact or consider measuring schools’ carbon offsetting efforts. The development of such rankings would mean that tackling climate change offers reputational advantage.

A second aspect of this proposal is to encourage dialogue with students about these issues through our teaching. Many students are interested in such issues, as reflected in their participation in global climate strikes as well as local Green Impact awards that recognise their efforts to create positive change for a sustainable future. Outside of dedicated sustainability or climate units, we could integrate climate related topics into some of our classes. We could discuss businesses that are declaring a carbon negative or carbon zero approach and consider such examples through case studies. We could also ask students to develop ideas about how to work with business schools to measure and manage their own use of international travel. These cases and ideas could be assessed through the lens of various subjects, spanning from accounting to organizational behaviour and strategy. These two aspects of a green grades proposal would fuel competition both between and within business schools in terms of how to address climate change.

A DEMOCRATIC CONCLUSION

I offer my proposals of alternating the academy, creating carbon costs, and giving green grades as complementary and mutually reinforcing suggestions to drive changes in how we travel. While I have drawn on my personal experiences to identify several ways in which business schools are complicit in climate change, my focus on international travel is but one aspect. Further conversations and research beyond my perspective are required urgently to establish the impact of business schools on the environment and, more importantly, how to address them. Perhaps some will view such discussions as pointless – for what difference can business schools really make to climate change? This view denies the privileged platform that business schools possess to role model new behaviours to students. Many of these students will go on to work for or with thousands upon thousands of companies around the world and can exert considerable influence on their practices.

I recognise that my proposals may stem from a misreading of my community’s sentiment. Perhaps colleagues will view my suggestions as either ineffective or unnecessary.
Either of these outcomes is positive if they encourage further discussion that leads to a superior set of proposals to act on. There are direct and democratic ways for us to progress. Ask our conference organizers to allow attendees to vote on proposals, whether those I provided here or others, in the same way we elect conference committee members. Similarly, discuss carbon costs in faculty meetings and facilitate a dialogue about involvement in cap-and-trade systems. Students will be clear whether they support initiatives like green grades through their evaluations of our classes. Through these democratic mechanisms, we can each express our collective views of if and how we wish to address the issue of climate change.

We can bring changes to the way business schools run and how academics work, if we really want to. But we must be prepared to embrace change and to do so quickly. For we are fighting against swift and earth-shattering change, and time presses, and History to the defeated.

May say Alas but cannot alter or pardon.

POSTSCRIPT

At the time of completing this essay we face the coronavirus pandemic. The human and economic costs of this pandemic continue to mount. In response, academics and students around the world have adopted social distancing measures and ceased air travel. Practices that once seemed peripheral have suddenly become central to management education and research. Traditional classroom-based teaching has given way to digital teaching. Some conferences are being cancelled while others are set to become completely virtual. To draw on Orwell once again, it is quite possible that tackling the climate crisis will require less social change than has already been forced upon us by the common hardships of a pandemic.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Rick Delbridge and the editorial team for their support in developing this essay. Thank you to the many colleagues and students from around the world who commented on earlier drafts.

NOTE

[1] I have adapted the first and last sentences of this essay from George Orwell’s (1941) essay, ‘The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius’. In it, he argued for the need to change outdated social practices (the English class system) to address a life-threatening challenge (the Second World War).

REFERENCES

Academy of Management (2018). 78th Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management Program, 10–14 August. Chicago: Academy of Management. Available at https://my.aom.org/ProgramDocs/2018/pdf/AOM_2018_Annual_Meeting_Program.pdf (accessed March 2020).

BBC (2019). Climate Change: Should You Fly, Drive or Take the Train?. Available at https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-49349566 (accessed March 2020).
Endo, N., Yamana, T. and Eltahir, E. A. (2017). ‘Impact of climate change on malaria in Africa: A combined modelling and observational study’. *The Lancet*, 389, S7.

Howard-Grenville, J., Buckle, S. J., Hoskins, B. J. and George, G. (2014). ‘Climate change and management’. *Academy of Management Journal*, 57, 615–23.

Orwell, G. (1941/2018). *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius*. London: Penguin.

Shields, R. (2019). ‘The sustainability of international higher education: Student mobility and global climate change’. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 217, 594–602.

Terrenoire, E., Hauglustaine, D., Gasser, T. and Penanhoat, O. (2019). ‘The contribution of carbon dioxide emissions from the aviation sector to future climate change’. *Environmental Research Letters*, 14, 084019.