Like all professions, academia is inextricably connected with global networks. It is perhaps unusual – in comparison to some lines of work – in that career progression is directly correlated in multiple ways to the level of global integration which academics have. This means that from a very early point in a career, academics are aware of the need to develop global networks – largely through attendance at international conferences. Inevitably, the result is that many academics have a very large carbon footprint.

Internationalisation has been at the heart of the academic sector for at least two decades, at the heart of university rankings and professional development. Use of the concept “international” makes it seem as though it should have a progressive core, but this isn’t necessarily so. Most international networks are pushed in the development of North-North connections, rather than North-South or South-South ones. Thus university internationalisation may largely contribute towards the growing economic inequalities which characterise the current world economic structure, as well as to the unsustainability of current carbon emissions.

The rise this year of movements such as Extinction Rebellion, and of Greta Thunberg’s campaign against the Climate Emergency, should focus our minds as to how we can respond creatively, constructively, ethically and responsibly to these multiple and irreconcilable pressures. It is clear that continued expansion and internationalisation agendas are utterly unsustainable, and therefore entirely in contravention of the stated policies of the university sector (e.g. ‘In service to society’); but it is also clear that value systems, career ladders, and competitive environments are far too entrenched to make change easy to come by.

It is not the purpose of this blog/working paper to cast judgments or call anyone, or anything, out. It also draws a definite line between professional and private lives. When so many of us have personal commitments in far-flung places, it would be misplaced to draw an equivalence between university internationalisation and the maintenance of vital emotional bonds. With regard to our professional lives, all of us are involved in these networks, and indeed the two authors of this blog especially so given the nature of our research. Moreover, while the current career structure is in place, it would be completely wrong for academics who have benefited from internationalisation to pull up the ladder after them.

At the same time, it is our view that we cannot sit here and pretend that nothing is happening, nor that there is no requirement for us as intellectuals and scholars responsibly to begin conversations as to the sustainability of our discipline, and what changes can or should be made to improve this.

Moreover we are both firmly of the view that “sustainability” is an elastic term which does not refer only to the environment. Improving the environmental sustainability of our discipline may also prove to be at the core of the intellectual and emotional sustainability of us as academics, scholars, and human beings. Many of us sense that the current university structure encourages overproduction and overactivity, which is conducive neither to our mental health nor to the sustainability of the environment – nor indeed necessarily to good
scholarship. Making changes to increase the sustainability of our discipline can also therefore address the increasing emotional unsustainability of academia.

The intention of this working paper is therefore simply to begin a conversation in which anyone who so wishes can participate. It is hoped that something concrete might come out of that conversation, and if so, that this could potentially be rolled out to other History departments and the RHS as a starting point for a broader discussion within the Academy.

Some will feel that this is unwarranted interference. The “market”, they say, will sort it out, or else state forces beyond our control will take the lead. However, it is our conclusion that all evidence suggests that the “market” (including that within the university sector) has not and will not resolve this issue, and state forces are proving imponderably slow. Academia is increasingly unsustainable in multiple ways. Thus it is beholden to us to begin to consider solutions for ourselves.

Thunberg has called for Zero Carbon by 2025. Clearly this is likely to be unachievable, but what concrete steps could/should departments and academics take in the current climate crisis? This blog rules nothing in and out; it makes a few suggestions for discussion here, just to get the ball rolling, and welcomes more. The ideas have been generated in an attempt to balance the different requirements of intergenerational climate justice and professional activity: prioritising sustainability, but at the same time recognising that scholars at earlier stages in their career have more need to circulate internationally.

The suggestions are graded, first from local departmental-level action (History departments/schools); then University-level action, where we can work at an institutional level; then within the framework of national bodies; and then finally within each of our own individual research networks.

1) Departmental-level action at King’s and beyond
University departments thrive on active research cultures, and depend therefore on seminars, visitors (be they speakers to seminars, visiting scholars, or colleagues), and such activity to develop their intellectual ethos. Such activities are also a vital part of how our departments are “graded”, in the REF, through the academic environment. They are a vital part of the continuity of our profession, and of its vitality, but at the same time certain easy steps could be taken to make this more sustainable.

Conferences/Workshops
Some ideas might include:
:- Make vegan food the norm for catering, and asking people to “opt in” for meat, fish and dairy options, rather than to “opt out” for vegan options – thus reducing the climate impact of events
:- Nominating a month per year for a “Green History month”, where there is a dedicated focus on environmental history, and where virtual events are organised – virtual conferences, virtual seminars and the like – thus normalising such activity.
:- Setting advisory ceilings to colleagues’ international conference participation, dependent on: 1, discipline/location of research area; 2, level of seniority, with junior colleagues (postdocs and lecturers) given added leeway to participate in more conferences where appropriate.
2) University-level action
Universities are increasingly aware of the importance of sustainability in their activities, and some (e.g., La Trobe in Australia) are aiming to be carbon neutral within the next decade. While the environmental impact activities of many universities are lessening, several easy steps could be made. Some ideas might include:

**Technology**
- That all universities should allow and in fact normalise vivas by Skype, Zoom or other remote means – common practice in Brazil, and also used in European institutions (such as the EUI in Florence). In 2019, it does seem absurd that PhD vivas generally require the presence of examiners. This would also considerably expand the potential pool of those examiners.
- That all universities should be required to invest in state-of-the-art virtual conferencing facilities, and to make these available in a minimum number of conferencing rooms to facilitate such virtual conferences/meetings

**Promotion/Career Structure**
- That conference attendance and seminar activity be taken out of annual review and promotion assessments, encouraging a more sustainable level of activity in environmental and mental health terms
- That universities should guide all colleagues who are members of international panels/review boards/committees to inform chairs of these boards that they prefer to attend such meetings virtually

**Travel**
- Planting institutional forests for the purposes of carbon offsetting
- Ensuring that all of the university’s international travel is more than offset by carbon reduction projects
- Incentivising train travel for all travel where possible – for instance by creating an additional research fund to provide colleagues who travel by train instead of aeroplane with additional funds to cover the potentially increased costs

**Miscellaneous**
- Banning plastic cutlery, plates and glasses in conference catering
- Introducing at least one service day a year, in which departments could do one of several things to address sustainability, including: collective tree planting; sponsored walks to raise money for carbon offsetting

3) National-level action
Nationally, there are levels of action which organisations such as the RHS (and other subject-specific learned societies) could take, as well as institutions such as the Wellcome Trust, the AHRC and the ESRC. Some ideas might include:

- That funding bodies such as the AHRC, ESRC and Wellcome insist that all travel involved in research grants is carbon offset – either through the costings of the project or by the applicant’s institution
- That each learned society nominates a month or months as green months, where activity is virtual and there is a focus on environmental scholarship
- That each learned society seeks to normalise virtual participation in a variety of different fora, through means such as improved technologies and green months
That learned societies should campaign collectively for the introduction of taxation on aviation fuel, through which airline emissions would be reduced by 11% if this was introduced, according to a recent EU report: [https://www.ft.com/content/1ce24798-733b-11e9-bbfb-5c68069fbd15](https://www.ft.com/content/1ce24798-733b-11e9-bbfb-5c68069fbd15).

4) Personal Research Networks/Action
Attending conferences (whether virtually or in person) is a vital part of the profession; and a key part of grant applications is often promising to organise and then organising conferences, which makes them central to research and career progression. Yet we have all attended many conferences which were underwhelming, or else travelled long distances to speak for as little as 15 minutes to small audiences. Moreover, time spent rehashing conference papers and travelling to/from them detracts from the vital work of reading and thinking that can produce new ideas.

In general it is our view that a reduction (not removal) of conference activity, and normalising virtual activity, can be an important part of environmental and personal sustainability. While conferences provide an important sense of community in what can be a very isolating profession, they can also be part of the framework of inequity that dogs that same profession. It has been pointed out to us that colleagues at an early career stage can find that precarious employment/study also often produces patterns of immobility, as attendance at conferences and archival trips become impossible due to lack of funds, additional non-academic employment and so on. “Greening” conferencing through the use of digital technology therefore offers a potentially important way forward on a number of fronts.

Steps towards this could include:
- Responding to invitations to participate in international conferences by offering to do so virtually
- Travelling by train for the purposes of conducting research/attending conferences, where possible
- Going for longer and immersing oneself more deeply when travelling for research – reversing the culture of in/out visits through longer research stays as part of fellowship programmes and/or institutional partnerships

*Finally….*
These are just a few ideas to get the discussion going. We are sure more will follow. We are looking forward to engaging with everyone on this vital question.

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