



Carbon offsetting – The University of Bristol position

Sustainability, February 2021

Carbon neutral target (Scopes 1 and 2)

In 2015, the University adopted a target to become carbon neutral in its core operations by 2030.

This 'net zero' target relates to Scope 1 and 2 emissions, i.e. those resulting directly from the running of the University's estate – mainly as a result of energy use in its own buildingsⁱ.

The strategy for achieving net zero recognises the need to offset the small portion of residual emissions that cannot be eliminated through efficiency and switching to zero carbon energy sources. A target for this offset allowance was set at 5% of emissions in the baseline year of 2005/6ⁱⁱ.

Since 2005/6, Scope 1 and 2 emissions from the University's own estate have been reduced by 33% to around 31,390 tCO₂e in 2018/19ⁱⁱⁱ. To reach the 2030 carbon neutral target with a 5% offset allowance, further reductions equating to around 90% of current emissions would still be required over the next ten years.

Scope 3 emissions

In 2019, the University became the first in the UK to declare a climate emergency, reaffirming its carbon neutral target and pledging similar action on Scope 3 emissions, including those from its supply chain, construction and business travel.

While Scope 1 and 2 emissions are well understood and relatively susceptible to reduction through investment and behavioural change, strategies for measuring and mitigating Scope 3 emissions are still evolving. These challenges are not unique to the higher education sector^{iv}.

Following initial estimates suggesting its Scope 3 emissions could reach twice the level of Scope 1 and 2 combined^v, the University is undertaking further work to measure its total carbon footprint.

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At the same time, action to reduce consumption and travel-related emissions is being promoted through a range of initiatives such as [School and Division Climate Action Plans](#) and the University's [Business Travel Toolkit](#).

Offsetting

To date, the University has not committed itself any particular form of carbon offsetting either for achieving net zero, or to compensate for any specific category of emissions, e.g. air travel.

Despite a growing commercial market, there are concerns that many carbon offset schemes are incompatible with global climate targets because they offer 'a licence to emit' and may in any case fail to deliver the promised emissions benefits^{vi}.

In the absence of a contracted solution for use by departments seeking to address specific sources of emissions, the University is currently [working with others in the HE sector to develop a robust standard](#) on carbon offsetting to support our net zero ambitions for all emissions (Scopes 1, 2 and 3).

In the meantime, if departments have a requirement to purchase carbon offsets for specific activities, e.g. to support a research grant application^{vii}, they should contact James Ryle in Sustainability for further advice^{viiiix}.

ⁱ The net zero target is limited to Scope 1 and 2 emissions over which the University has operational control and so excludes those from energy use in leased buildings. e.g. some student residences and hospital estate

ⁱⁱ [University of Bristol Carbon and Water Strategy 2017](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ [University of Bristol Sustainability Report 2018-19](#)

^{iv} See for example [technical guidance](#) published by the Greenhouse Gas Protocol for companies on calculating their Scope 3 emissions

^v Data presented to the [University's Climate Emergency People's Assembly](#) suggested that known Scope 3 emissions accounted for 70% of the University's total carbon footprint of over 130,000 tCO₂e in 2017/18, with emissions from business travel (mainly flights) equating to around a quarter of the total of Scope 1 and 2.

^{vi} For example: <https://www.ft.com/content/e2000050-0c7f-11ea-bb52-34c8d9dc6d84>

^{vii} For example, organisations applying for [Wellcome funding](#) are required by October 2021 to have arrangements in place to offset the carbon impact of all travel undertaken on their grants.

^{viii} Please contact James Ryle by [email](#) or via MS Teams

^{ix} If the need for carbon offsetting arises from current or planned international travel, colleagues are encouraged to review the [Business Travel Toolkit](#) in the first instance. This offers guidance on the options for reducing the need to travel and switching to sustainable forms of travel before considering offsets.