



De-carbonising Field Course Travel



University
of Exeter

SDG focus

- ☒ Goal 10 - Reduced inequalities
- ☒ Goal 12 - Responsible consumption and production
- ☒ Goal 13 - Climate action

What did you do?

The Department of Geography at the University of Exeter has been working to reduce the carbon emissions associated with international field course travel. In 2019, the Department's field course destinations were: Bay of Naples, Berlin, Brazil, California, Iceland, New York and Seville and had travel-related carbon emissions of 249.21 tCO₂e. Since the re-introduction of field courses after Covid-19, the Department has removed long-haul field course destinations and has made all international field courses optional for students. International field course travel emissions in 2025 were reduced to 13.75 tCO₂e (involving two no-fly field courses to Avignon and Freiburg, one part-fly field course to Berlin and a by-air course to Iceland). In 2026, all Geography field courses will be no-fly and will travel to Antwerp, Avignon, Freiburg, Paris and the Picos de Europa. Four will be by high-speed train and these trips will achieve over 80% carbon savings when compared to flying to these destinations.

What were the benefits and outcomes?

1. Significant reduction in the carbon emissions associated with field course travel. Reducing emissions associated educational travel is a significant challenge for universities and substantially reducing the environmental impact of Geography's education activities is contributing to climate action. This has helped to promote low-carbon field course travel

across the University of Exeter (through a [Field Course Task and Finish Group](#)) and other UK Geography departments, see this [academic commentary](#) and [blog](#).

2. Enabling students and staff to take practical action to reduce the environmental impact of education activities and so 'walk the talk' on climate action. The use of no-fly travel enables students to experience new ways of travelling that can have the co-benefits of reducing carbon impact and greater connection to both their surroundings and each other:

"I loved the trains! I never want to go on a plane again. The trains were so much easier, and you could see the surroundings. It made the travelling days a part of the trip rather than just the journey to the trip."

"Great time to bond with course mates and talk to lecturers. Very stress free. Feels like you experience Europe more. Stopping in lunch for Paris was nice too."

3. More inclusive and accessible experiences for students and staff through a range of measures. All Geography field courses are optional, meaning that students positively opt-in to travelling on a field course. The costs of travel, accommodation and two meals a day is included in the tuition fee for all field courses, reducing inequalities based on ability to pay. No-fly travel can also be positive for those who have a fear of flying. Indeed, running such no-fly trips has enabled a full audit of inclusivity and accessibility on field courses and how we can continuously work with students to improve access and participation.

What barriers or challenges did you encounter in embedding sustainability into your learning and teaching practice and how did you overcome them?

1. Initially, booking no-fly field course travel was challenging because mainstream travel management companies are not familiar with the demands of group travel by train. Indeed, the fragmented booking systems associated with rail travel in Europe mean that a lot of time and effort was initially required to book trips. However, this has been overcome by using a specialist educational group travel supplier who has expertise in no-fly group itineraries.

2. Reservations from colleagues in the University who are uncertain about the benefits of no-fly field course travel. These concerns range from those associated with additional travel times and costs, to anxieties about using international trains and risk management if itineraries go wrong. These concerns have been addressed through 'walking the talk' and demonstrating that such trips can be highly successful and popular, and demonstrating that anxieties can be managed through careful planning and gaining experience.

3. Student anxieties and concerns over no-fly itineraries for field courses. Some students express concerns about how to travel by train in Europe, given that this may be a new experience for them. To overcome this barrier, resources to help students prepare are provided and mitigation measures, to make trips smooth and relaxing, have been put in place, such as hotel stays near departure stations, additional time to change trains and allow for refreshment breaks, and travelling at less busy times of day.

What are your conclusions and recommendations for others?

Geography's transition to no-fly field courses is a major achievement, given the prominence that international field courses have in the discipline. By strongly making the environmental

case and demonstrating the feasibility of such experiences by 'walking the talk', it has been possible to make positive arguments for radical change, both within and beyond the University. Recommendations for others seeking to make this transition are that it's important to work with allies to argue for change, it's now possible to get positive examples and support from universities who are now running such trips, and that if you can, just do it and demonstrate to others that this is a positive learning experience that can significantly reduce carbon emissions from educational activities.

Web link to further information:

[University of Exeter Sustainability Report, 2023-24, page 20](#)