

Rethinking digital sustainability in higher education: organisational barriers and pathways for low-impact academic conferences

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper examines why carbon-intensive practices at academic conferences persist despite growing sustainability commitments within higher education institutions (HEIs). While prior research has addressed the environmental footprint of academic events and the technical feasibility of hybrid or decentralised formats, limited attention has been paid to the organisational and institutional mechanisms through which unsustainable conference practices are reproduced. The paper addresses this gap by investigating how organisational routines, institutional incentives and governance arrangements shape the adoption of more sustainable conference models.

Design/methodology/approach – The study adopts an exploratory empirical design combining a structured literature review with survey evidence collected during the 2024 EGOS Colloquium. The analysis examines travel and accommodation choices as indicators of the extent to which sustainability commitments are translated into conference-related practices.

Findings – The findings show that sustainability awareness alone does not lead to lower-impact behaviour. Carbon-intensive practices persist because they are embedded in organisational routines, reinforced by prestige- and networking-based participation norms, and weakly challenged by existing governance mechanisms. The study suggests that the persistence of unsustainable conference models reflects not only individual choice but also broader institutionalised patterns of academic participation.

Originality/value – The paper contributes to organisation theory and behaviour research by conceptualising conference sustainability as an organisational governance problem rather than only an environmental or technical one. It extends current debates on sustainable academic events by showing how institutional incentives and organisational inertia constrain change and by proposing an (E)ESG-based framework to support the assessment and redesign of conference governance in HEIs.

Keywords Digital transformation, Organisational design, Sustainable behaviour

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

Discussing sustainability frequently gets “eyerolls” though both public and private actors, including higher education institutions (HEIs) and the events field, have started reframing their organisational models to stick to SDGs goals. Within this shift, academic conferences

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represent not only scientific exchanges but also organisational practices that mirror the sustainability commitments and governance structures of HEIs. Such conferences emerge as both a challenge and an opportunity: although they are core to the academic system, providing key moments for in-person interaction, career progression, and knowledge exchange (Foley *et al.*, 2021; Hansen *et al.*, 2020; Ostrowicka and Okońska, 2019; Edelman *et al.*, 2017; Storme *et al.*, 2016), they are also highly resource-intensive and show both accessibility gaps and operational contradictions in contrast with proclaimed intentions and commitment (Mair and Smith, 2021; Pernecky and Lück, 2013). Moreover, even though international guidelines and sustainability standards have been proliferating (e.g. ISO, 2012:2012, UNEP Green Meeting Guide), organisers often face barriers due to insufficient resources (in terms of time, expertise, finances), infrastructure limitations, and misaligned stakeholder interests, which hinder the adoption of alternative models (Elvira and Pratomo, 2023; Zhong *et al.*, 2021; Mair and Jago, 2010; Gereffi *et al.*, 2005). At the same time, drivers such as regulatory pressure, reputational benefits, and digital innovation are increasingly pushing organisations to experiment with new formats.

This paper advances organisational theory by conceptualising academic conferences as governance grounds where institutional logics such as academic prestige, financial and logistical efficiency, and sustainability commitments interact and often collide. Rather than focussing solely on documenting emerging sustainability practices, this perspective extends existing debates by problematizing how incentive structures, evaluation practices, and organisational routines within HEIs affect the adoption of alternative conference models.

Despite a growing body of literature exploring sustainable event design, that mainly focuses on reducing the emissions from transport, flights in particular (Van Ewijk and Hoekman, 2020), unsustainable catering and material use (Neugebauer *et al.*, 2020; Mair, 2019; Pernecky, 2015), discussions on sustainable events often focus on labelling events as “eco” or “green” in order to be considered “sustainable”. Consequently, a purely environmental lens emerges (Pernecky, 2015), rather than systemic organisational change (Mair, 2019; Pernecky and Lück, 2013). This highlights the need to move beyond surface-level interventions and consider the organisational conditions that enable or hinder long-term transformation. Sustainability is still perceived as a duty, rather than an integrated organisational objective, which raises a governance issue.

This complexity mirrors a broader dilemma in the discourse on digital transformation. As Carroll *et al.* (2023) emphasise, much of the existing literature tends to treat digital transformation as a linear or purely technical process, often neglecting its inherent ambiguities and socio-organisational complexities. In parallel, Breiter *et al.* (2024) highlight how organisations embarking on the so-called “twin transformation”, integrating digital innovation and sustainability, face uneven maturity levels and a lack of strategic alignment. These perspectives suggest that advancing digital sustainability requires more than deploying technological solutions: it demands a critical rethinking of transformation logics, maturity models, and ways in which environmental and social goals are operationalised.

These tensions are particularly acute in the case of academic conferences, where the accelerated shift to digital and hybrid formats, boosted by the pandemic, has sparked both enthusiasm and scepticism (Parncutt *et al.*, 2021; Leochico *et al.*, 2021). Although digital solutions offer the promise of reduced emissions and greater inclusiveness (Sarabipour, 2020; Glover *et al.*, 2019), they also raise new concerns related to ICT energy consumption (Cavallin Toscani *et al.*, 2023; Verdecchia *et al.*, 2023; Wackernagel and Beyers, 2019), digital exclusion in under-resourced regions (Yates *et al.*, 2022; Leochico *et al.*, 2021), and organisational inertia that hinders systemic change (Mair and Smith, 2021; Leochico *et al.*, 2021; Funke and Lago, 2022; Tao *et al.*, 2021).

Against this backdrop, the present study adopts a research-in-progress approach to explore which organisational barriers and drivers influence the adoption of alternative conference models, such as multi-hub and hybrid formats, beyond the single-location paradigm.

More broadly, the paper aligns with scholarship on systemic sustainability transitions in HEIs, by situating academic conferences within the broader debate on how universities can reconfigure their academic practices and governance to align sustainability commitments with digital innovation.

While prior studies have examined the environmental footprint of academic conferences and the promise of digital or hybrid formats, less is known about why these alternatives remain difficult to institutionalise within HEIs. Existing literature has largely focused on technical solutions and environmental impacts, while paying less attention to the organisational routines, governance arrangements, and competing institutional logics that sustain carbon-intensive conference practices. This paper addresses this gap by asking: How do organisational barriers, institutional drivers, and governance structures within HEIs influence the adoption of more sustainable conference models? Drawing on a structured literature review and empirical evidence from the 2024 EGOS Colloquium, the paper argues that conference sustainability should be understood not only as a matter of greener event design, but as a broader governance problem shaped by incentives, legitimacy, and organisational inertia.

To answer this question, the analysis is organised around three dimensions: organisational barriers, institutional drivers, and governance mechanisms.

2. Literature review

This paper contributes to organisation theory by reframing academic conferences as organisational governance sites in which competing institutional logics are enacted and reproduced. Rather than approaching conferences as technical arrangements or isolated sustainability practices, the study conceptualises them as routinised organisational settings where decision-making reflects broader tensions between sustainability commitments, academic prestige, and operational efficiency within higher education institutions (HEIs).

2.1 Digital sustainability and measurement issues

The theoretical debate surrounding the shift from in-person to digital and hybrid academic conferences was catalysed by the pandemic and often contrasts the immersive, career-enhancing experience of onsite conferences (Bockstahler *et al.*, 2023; Hameed *et al.*, 2021; Edelman *et al.*, 2017) with the inclusivity and sustainability potential of hybrid models (Funke and Lago, 2022; Parncutt *et al.*, 2021). On the other hand, though, complexities arise in terms of logistics and significant coordination required to run hybrid events, along with the risk of reinforcing digital inequalities for participants from the Global South or regions with poor ICT infrastructure (Leochico *et al.*, 2021; Jackson *et al.*, 2020); such disparities raise the question of whether multi-hub conferences genuinely democratise participation, or whether they create stratified tiers of engagement within a formally unified event.

Fully virtual formats are also not inherently “sustainable”: although they can reduce carbon emissions by up to 94% and cumulative energy demand by 90% (Tao *et al.*, 2021), they depend on high-energy-consuming infrastructures such as data centres and streaming platforms, which increasingly contribute to global electricity demand (Rutelli, 2024), while the need for implementing digital sobriety practices starts to catch on (Periyasamy *et al.*, 2022). As Verdecchia *et al.* (2023) show in their review, the energy demands of digital tools, such as large-scale virtual services, are substantial and must be critically assessed before claiming sustainable benefits. Beyond environmental concerns, organisers must account for the costs of video conferencing licences, virtual platforms, and technical setups, which can be significant (Cavusoglu *et al.*, 2023).

Furthermore, while many tools are available to quantify the sustainability of events, particularly through carbon foot printing, there is a tendency to over-reliance on fragmented and inconsistent indicators, resulting in a partial and non-uniform evaluation of the events and reducing the possibility of a macro-level view of the industry. Carbon calculators often differ

in methodology and rarely keep track of indirect or social dimensions, such as diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) (Neugebauer *et al.*, 2020; Wackernagel *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, carbon offsetting mechanisms, frequently adopted to symbolically “neutralise” emissions, raise significant concerns regarding their effectiveness and credibility. Several critiques highlight the limitations of these practices, including issues of additionality, permanence, and transparency, ultimately resulting in misleading claims of “carbon neutrality” (Romm *et al.*, 2025; Blanchard *et al.*, 2024; Clark *et al.*, 2009). Despite these criticisms, more effective approaches to reducing the environmental impact of academic conferences have been proposed. Rather than focussing on offsetting and carbon sequestration, a contribution-based model encourages direct emissions reductions alongside support for high-quality sustainability initiatives such as biodiversity protection and social development (Blanchard *et al.*, 2024). Crucially, the paradigm switch starts with terminology: unlike the misleading notion that offsetting “cancels out” emissions, the term “contribution” acknowledges the value of concrete climate actions and reduces the risk of greenwashing in the absence of references or standards (Blanchard *et al.*, 2024).

The gap between available sustainability tools and their actual implementation aligns with Kotlarsky *et al.* (2024)’s concerns about the lack of strategic and systemic integration of digital sustainability into organisational choices. They argue that while many digital initiatives exist, few achieve the cultural and structural transformation needed to align technology use with broader ESG objectives (Tavanti, 2023).

When examining the inclusivity of academic conferences, much remains underexplored in many digital sustainability frameworks, which tend to prioritise technological or environmental metrics. As this paper highlights, accessibility to academic conferences continues to be shaped by structural inequalities. Virtual formats alone do not guarantee inclusion: digital divides persist in terms of infrastructure, affordability, and the ability to engage meaningfully (Yates *et al.*, 2022; Leochico *et al.*, 2021). In parallel, traditional in-person models often reproduce disparities in the site selection process, as hosting opportunities tend to concentrate in affluent, well-connected regions (Foley *et al.*, 2021; Nolan, 2020). This pattern perpetuates geographic privilege and limits participation from underrepresented areas (Cavusoglu *et al.*, 2023; Glover *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, physical and political barriers, such as visa restrictions or discriminatory environments, can further marginalise certain groups, despite the formal openness of academic events (Doğan *et al.*, 2023; Jackson *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, advancing digital sustainability requires not only technological solutions (Van Ewijk and Hoekman, 2020) but also a critical reassessment of the socio-organisational logics that determine who gets to participate, speak, and shape the academic agenda.

2.2 Institutional logics and governance in HEIs

Overall, the study speaks directly to organisation theory debates on institutional logics, paradox, and governance in professional organisations by showing how sustainability commitments are translated – or resisted – within everyday organisational routines. These dynamics become particularly visible in the organisation of academic conferences, where professional expectations, institutional incentives, and governance arrangements shape not only how conferences are valued, but also whether sustainability goals can be effectively embedded in routine decisions.

In this context, Hansen *et al.* (2020) explore the ways researchers utilise conference support to enhance their professional recognition, employing the “credibility cycle” model as a theoretical framework. They argue that opportunities to enhance credibility at such events can be found in buzz, networking, access to grants, equipment and data, as well as scholarly presentations, publications, and overall recognition. Additionally, conferences serve as essential career-building platforms, especially for early-career researchers, providing visibility and opportunities to connect with influential figures in their field, such as journal editors, funding agencies, and senior academics (Edelheim *et al.*, 2017; Storme *et al.*, 2016).

The ability to engage in offhand conversations, encounter unexpected research ideas, and participate in social events that encourage deeper professional relationships is difficult to replicate in virtual settings (Foley *et al.*, 2021; Nelli and Bensi, 2023), where the process described as “pushing your luck” (Storme *et al.*, 2016) tends to be less beneficial when participants do not have an existing personal acquaintance (Nelli and Bensi, 2023). Moreover, conferences may also contribute to institutional visibility and indirect benefits. From a purely economic perspective, the primary motivation of individuals involved in conference organisation is not necessarily profit; however, there may be potential for indirect revenue through sponsorships, grant opportunities, and new student enrolment, often influenced by the university’s enhanced reputation (Foley *et al.*, 2021).

These dynamics contribute to the persistence of hypermobility in academia, despite growing awareness of its environmental costs (Higham and Font, 2020). Researchers often justify flying for career development, networking, or job security, and some perceive frequent travel as a professional obligation rather than a choice (Hopkins *et al.*, 2019). Economic and behavioural mechanisms further reinforce air travel in academia, as many scholars rationalise their flights through moral justifications, believing that their travel supports important research, teaching, or institutional visibility (Higham and Font, 2020). Other displace responsibility by attributing their travel to employer expectations, conference organisers, or tenure requirements, despite evidence suggesting that increased conference attendance does not necessarily translate to greater academic success (Wynes *et al.*, 2019). Some evidence suggests that travelling to international conferences can enhance citation counts, particularly for European scholars attending transatlantic events, although this effect varies by region and cannot be generalised (Chalvatzis and Ormosi, 2020). As mentioned, these tensions reveal a broader paradox, as researchers who advocate for environmental responsibility often contribute significantly to aviation emissions themselves. Fraser *et al.* (2017) highlight the paradox of scholars delivering climate-conscious messages at conferences that generate substantial emissions, while attendees may support green practices in principle but remain reluctant to incur additional costs to make their attendance more sustainable (Mair and Jago, 2010). The abstract nature of carbon emissions further facilitates disengagement from the moral implications of travel choices, while critics of frequent flying are more often met with resistance or dismissed as overly rigid (Higham and Font, 2020).

These patterns are reinforced by institutional structures. It is challenging for researchers to limit or eliminate scholarly flights given their role in knowledge exchange, job opportunities, career development, networking, and academic prestige, especially for early-career academics (Kreil, 2021). Although limiting air travel is often perceived as potentially hindering research quality, alternative perspectives suggest that science could remain unaffected or even benefit from such changes (Kreil, 2021). Consequently, this suggests that addressing academic air travel emissions requires institutional rather than purely individual efforts (Chalvatzis and Ormosi, 2020).

At the same time, governance and organisational barriers further complicate these dynamics. Academics often face significant time and resources constraints, making both organising and attending conferences demanding activities (Hansen *et al.*, 2020). Organising such events is typically considered a secondary task for researchers, requiring them to divert attention from their academic duties. Foley *et al.* (2021) highlight the lack of institutional backing during both bidding and organisational phases, as well as the absence of formal recognition or merit assigned to hosting efforts, further reinforcing the perception of conference organisation as an additional burden rather than an integrated component of academic work, even though these barriers tend to be less daunting when conferences are managed by institutions or scientific societies rather than individual researchers. A broader strategic vision is often missing, making it difficult to measure or leverage the benefits of hosting a conference, such as increasing international visibility or attracting funding (Foley *et al.*, 2021).

Diving deeper into institutional logics, the bidding process for hosting conferences emerges as it presents further challenges: successful proposals must convincingly demonstrate the event's value, including location appeal, organisational capacity, event structure, and a well-structured budget. Nolan (2020) notes that this process is inherently biased in favour of well-established destinations that already possess the ideal infrastructure and financial incentives. Many convention bureaus in wealthier nations provide subvention, creating an uneven playing field where only a few privileged countries repeatedly secure hosting rights, while other struggle to compete (Nolan, 2020). The established reputation of academic institutions in certain locations further reinforces this concentration: destinations that already serve as hubs of academic excellence attract more conferences, as they are perceived as easier access points to more influential scholars and career opportunities, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of visibility and recognition (Nolan, 2020).

These structural dynamics intersect with broader systemic inequalities within academia and align with Sarabipour (2020)'s claims. The author denounces persistent biases in conference accessibility and inclusion, with women and minority researchers underrepresented in speaking engagements, organising committees, and panel discussions. This exclusion has long-term career consequences, as visibility at major conferences is often a prerequisite for securing research grants, tenure, and promotions (Higham and Font, 2020).

In response to these tensions, some scholars suggest that air travel reduction should be selective rather than absolute, emphasising mitigation through strategic changes rather than strict travel bans (Kreil, 2021). Alternating between in-person and virtual conferences, organising multi-hub events (see §2.3), or consolidating multiple commitments within a single trip may reduce emissions while maintaining networking opportunities (Higham and Font, 2020; Neugebauer *et al.*, 2020; Bockstahler *et al.*, 2023; Cavallin Toscani *et al.*, 2023; D Souza *et al.*, 2023). However, addressing the "elephant in the room" ultimately requires a shift in both policy and cultural attitudes, extending sustainability initiatives beyond surface-level commitments and enabling meaningful reductions in the impact of academic gatherings (Caset *et al.*, 2018).

As described, these dynamics show how sustainability commitments in HEIs are filtered through and shaped by institutionalised mobility norms, career incentives, and governance arrangements that affect everyday decisions about conference participation and hosting. As a result, existing hierarchies of visibility, recognition, and resource allocation tend to be reproduced, making alternative, lower-carbon conference models more difficult to institutionalise.

2.3 Alternative models: the multi-hub approach

The traditional single-location format of academic conferences has been increasingly questioned due to its significant environmental footprint and structural inequalities in participation (Funke and Lago, 2022; Bertella and Castriotta, 2024). As mentioned, long-haul travel to conferences contributes heavily to carbon emissions, while financial, institutional, and geographical barriers often make attendance an exclusive privilege rather than a universally accessible opportunity (Nelli and Bensi, 2023). In response, multi-hub conference models have emerged as a promising alternative to hybrid configurations, offering a more sustainable and inclusive format while maintaining the essential benefits of face-to-face academic exchange (Parncutt *et al.*, 2021). It should be noted that these models are not merely logistical variants; they represent a more profound shift in how digital transformation and sustainability transformation can intersect to produce what Breiter *et al.* (2024) and Graf-Drasch *et al.* (2023) conceptualise as a "twin transformation": a co-evolution of digital innovation and systemic sustainability redesign.

Specifically, multi-hub models, whose design and organisation are described by Etzion *et al.* (2022), Parncutt *et al.* (2021), Tao *et al.* (2021), Leochico *et al.* (2021), Bousema *et al.* (2020), and Fraser *et al.* (2017), aim to distribute the conference across multiple regional hubs, where participants gather in-person at decentralised locations while engaging virtually with

other hubs, thus reducing the need for hypermobility (Tao *et al.*, 2021; Bousema *et al.*, 2020). On the other hand, leaving space for the initiative of secondary destinations, marginalised city districts, or smaller regional areas contributes to the facilitation of equitable access to bidding processes for conference hosting, thereby mitigating the risk of the “privilege of the few” phenomenon. Proximity hubs can also offer opportunities for scholars, especially early-career researchers or those with limited funding, to engage in global academic exchanges and conference-like networking that would otherwise be unattainable (Parncutt *et al.*, 2021).

Although stimulating and adaptable to flexible configurations, the model raises some organisational challenges. Along with resource distribution, technical coordination, and the difficulty of maintaining strong professional networks across dispersed locations, the organisational burden of coordinating multiple hubs requires extensive pre-conference planning, with clear roles assigned to local organising teams, centralised IT support, and a shared communication platform (Parncutt *et al.*, 2021). To enhance the long-term feasibility of this model, conference organisers should secure multi-year funding agreements, collaborate with international academic associations, and develop standardised best practices for multi-hub event execution (Bousema *et al.*, 2020; Fraser *et al.*, 2017), along with balancing sustainability goals with logistical feasibility, ensuring that the chosen hub locations effectively minimise unnecessary travel while maintaining meaningful in-person interactions (Tao *et al.*, 2021). To develop this last point, digital collaboration tools such as shared research repositories, interactive virtual panels, and cross-hub working groups can reinforce the coherence of the conference despite its decentralised nature (Etzion *et al.*, 2022).

This reconfiguration reflects the need to go beyond technical fixes or superficial digitalisation. In line with Graf-Drasch *et al.* (2023), organisational design should evolve to support sustainability as an integral goal rather than an add-on. In this sense, multi-hub conferences can serve as a testing ground for new governance models and operational frameworks that integrate environmental and social dimensions through digital coordination.

Ultimately, the discussion of multi-hub strategies illustrates that sustainable digital transformation is not simply about replacing face-to-face interactions with virtual ones, but about rethinking the design principles of academic gatherings, including innovative digital engagement methods that could help compensate for the loss of personal interaction (Van Ewijk and Hoekman, 2020). If supported by adequate policies, metrics, and organisational commitment, these models have the potential to operationalise sustainability beyond rhetoric, moving toward systemic change in how knowledge is produced and shared across the globe.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study adopts an exploratory mixed-method design combining a structured literature review with an exploratory survey. The literature review aims to identify key conceptual dimensions related to sustainability, digital transformation, and governance mechanisms in academic conferences, while the empirical component provides an illustrative basis to explore how these dynamics manifest in practice. The combination of these two components allows the study to connect theoretical insights with preliminary empirical observations, while maintaining the exploratory nature of the research, and to interpret observed behavioural patterns through the lens of broader organisational and institutional dynamics. More specifically, the research design follows a sequential exploratory logic, where the literature review informs the analytical framework and guides the interpretation of the empirical evidence.

3.2 Literature review protocol

The literature review was conducted following a structured but non-systematic approach aimed at identifying the main theoretical and empirical contributions on academic conference sustainability, digital transformation, and governance in higher education institutions. The

research was carried out using major academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. A combination of keywords was employed, such as “academic conferences”, “event sustainability”, “digital sustainability”, “hybrid events”, “multi-hub conferences”, “academic mobility”, “conference governance”. The keywords were combined using Boolean operators (AND/OR) to refine and expand the results (e.g. “academic conference” AND “sustainability”; “hybrid events” OR “multi-hub conference”).

The selection process followed explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria: included sources were peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, and book chapters with clear relevance to the research question. Non-academic sources such as journalistic articles and opinion-based contributions without empirical or theoretical grounding were excluded. The review prioritised recent contributions in order to capture post-pandemic developments in digital and hybrid conferencing, but a limited number of earlier works were retained where they provided foundational conceptual insights.

The study did not aim for exhaustive coverage but was designed to support theory building. The selected literature was therefore analysed thematically, leading to the identification of three main analytical categories: (1) digital and environmental sustainability in academic conferences; (2) institutional logics, academic mobility, and governance in HEIs; (3) alternative organisational models for sustainable conferencing, including hybrid and multi-hub configurations. The resulting analytical categories informed both the literature review (Section 2) and the interpretation of the empirical findings.

3.3 Empirical setting

In the academic context, conferences represent key opportunities for networking and professional exchange, with a significant impact on scholars’ careers. As discussed in the previous paragraphs, alternative organisational formats have increasingly been considered in recent years, especially after the pandemic.

The EGOS 2024 Colloquium, held in Milan and attended by over 2,000 international scholars, offered a particularly significant context for this discussion; as a major conference in the field of organisational studies, it provided both international scope and a large dataset (910 valid responses to the survey). Accordingly, the availability of microdata from an event of this scale offers a valuable exploratory entry point for examining the persistence of behavioural patterns in academic mobility, as it reflects a large-scale academic setting where institutional norms, mobility practices, and sustainability commitments intersect. Although EGOS 2024 adopted a hybrid format, with both in-person and virtual sessions, the analysis focuses on responses from in-person participants.

Importantly, the data are not presented here as a generalisable case study, but rather as a contextual illustration that complements the theoretical arguments advanced in the previous sections.

3.4 Data collection

A structured survey was conducted among conference attendees to examine travel preferences, digital engagement, and their perception of sustainable practices. It was launched before the EGOS 2024 Colloquium (July 2024) and remained accessible to registered onsite participants throughout the conference. As it relied on self-reported information collected partly before the event, the data may be subject to reporting bias and to potential gaps between declared intentions and actual behaviour.

The survey, embedded in the official conference application, included structured questions on (1) country of origin, (2) mode of travel to Milan, (3) use of connecting flights, (4) accommodation type and selection criteria, and (5) perceived importance of sustainable practices in travel and lodging decisions. The survey variables were aligned with the analytical

categories identified in the literature review, which allows for an exploratory assessment of how these dimensions manifest in practice.

Downloading the app was not mandatory for participants, though participation in the survey was required for in-person attendees who wished to receive real-time meeting information through the app.

3.5 Sample and limitations

Table 1 summarises the sample composition and response process. The final dataset included 910 valid responses, with a proportion of missing responses across two variables.

The dataset was analysed through descriptive statistics (percentages and frequency distributions) to identify recurrent patterns in travel and accommodation choices. Given the exploratory scope of this study, no advanced inferential methods were applied at this stage; data are therefore intended to illustrate persistent behavioural tendencies rather than to provide generalisable findings.

Among the limitations of this preliminary data collection, self-selection bias must be considered, given that downloading the app was optional. Therefore, the sample could over-represent participants who are more digitally inclined or attentive to issues of sustainability and organisation. In addition, the analysis focuses exclusively on in-person participants, excluding virtual attendees. This may limit the ability to capture differences between participation formats.

4. Findings

Table 2 summarises the main empirical patterns emerging from the EGOS 2024 survey and links them to theoretical interpretation through the organisational lens of institutional logics and governance implications. It focuses on how observed behavioural patterns reflect the influence of institutionalised routines, incentive systems, and governance arrangements in HEIs.

4.1 Mobility patterns

Finding 1. Sustainability awareness does not translate into lower-carbon mobility choices.

The collected data highlighted notable contradictions. Although environmental concerns were widely acknowledged, a significant proportion of respondents expressed unwillingness to modify travel behaviour, especially when digital alternatives were perceived as inadequate for networking, visibility opportunities and technical inconvenience. In addressing consumption and travel choices among “EGOSians”, the data on international and connecting flights revealed that air travel was the most prevalent mode of transportation (69.7%), while rail ranked second (20.1%). This aligns with literature establishing that among all forms of consumption within academia, air travel has the most significant impact on conference total emissions; also, when alternatives are encouraged, matters like personal freedom of choice and need for convenience often prevail.

Table 1. Sample description

Category	N	Notes
Onsite attendees	2,305	Total conference participants
App downloads	935	Not mandatory to join the conference
Completed surveys	934	Required to access real-time information
Valid responses	910	Excluded incomplete/inconsistent responses
Missing data (“prefer not to answer”)	181	53 transport; 122 country of origin
Source(s): Authors’ own work		

Table 2. Main findings and theoretical interpretation

Finding	Main empirical evidence	Theoretical interpretation (institutional logics)	Governance implication
1. Sustainability awareness does not translate into lower-carbon mobility choices	Air travel dominates mobility choices (69.7%), followed by rail (20.1%); high awareness of environmental issues but low willingness to change travel behaviour	Sustainability logic remains weaker than mobility norms associated with academic participation; behaviour reflects a tension between environmental awareness and institutionalised expectations of physical presence	Move beyond awareness-based approaches by redesigning incentive systems, travel funding criteria, and evaluation standards to legitimise lower-carbon participation modes
2. Conference participation remains structured by prestige and mobility norms	Travel decisions prioritise networking, visibility, and career advancement; digital alternatives perceived as inadequate for professional interaction	Prestige and career advancement logics dominate over sustainability considerations, reinforcing hypermobility as a norm of legitimate academic engagement	Recalibrate academic evaluation and recognition systems (e.g. promotion, funding, visibility metrics) to reduce structural dependence on physical mobility
3. Soft sustainability nudges have limited behavioural effects	Low choice of sustainable accommodation (16%); official sustainability recommendations (e.g. hotel lists) largely disregarded in favour of convenience and autonomy	Weak institutionalisation of sustainability logic: soft nudges fail when not aligned with dominant logics of convenience, autonomy, and efficiency	Complement soft measures with stronger governance mechanisms (standards, incentives, default options, accountability tools) embedded in conference design
4. Participation asymmetries reveal structural inequalities in access	High geographical concentration (top 10 countries = 73.88%); participation patterns imply reliance on long-haul air travel (e.g. UK, USA, Canada)	Inequality-reproducing institutional logics: access to conferences reflects uneven distributions of funding, prestige, and global academic centrality	Promote more equitable and decentralised conference models (e.g. multi-hub formats), alongside governance mechanisms addressing resource and access asymmetries
Source(s): Authors' own work			

These observations suggest that sustainability awareness alone does not necessarily translate into lower-carbon mobility choices. Rather than proving a purely individual inconsistency, this mismatch can be read as an exploratory indication that mobility behaviour is embedded in a wider organisational context in which environmentally preferable alternatives remain secondary to other participation-related priorities.

4.2 Accommodation and sustainability choices

Finding 2. Conference participation remains structured by prestige and mobility norms.

Going beyond the surface, the data may reflect more than individual preference, since participation in international conferences is often embedded in professional expectations linked to visibility, networking, and career progression. In this sense, hypermobility can be interpreted as aligned with institutional norms and incentive structures that continue to privilege physical presence (Higham and Font, 2020). The insights underscore the environmental-organisational paradox at the heart of conference design: despite increasing

awareness and new reflections on how to rethink conferences, in the post-pandemic era, in more sustainable ways, traditional preferences for physical attendance persist, often reinforced by academic norms and professional expectations (Raven *et al.*, 2023; Higham and Font, 2020; Hopkins *et al.*, 2019). Consequently, sustainability goals may continue to be subordinated to economic and logistical convenience and academic prestige (Funke and Lago, 2022).

In this sense, conference participation appears to remain structured less by a sustainability logic than by prestige and mobility norms.

4.3 Limits of soft sustainability governance

Finding 3. Soft sustainability nudges have limited behavioural effects.

Shifting to accommodation choices for those who stayed in Milan for at least one night, a weak focus on selecting “eco-friendly- hotels” (16%) emerged. Nonetheless, it would be crucial to understand the extent to which the accommodation is committed to “green” choices, while remaining wary of those who advertise themselves as “zero emissions”. Moreover, the list of sustainable hotels recommended by EGOS was not generally taken into account by participants, as the need for convenience and personal freedom of choice prevailed. On the other hand, this behaviour suggests that soft sustainability guidelines have limited influence when not accompanied by stronger governance mechanisms or incentive alignment. At this stage, the data do not allow causal inferences; however, they offer preliminary indications of patterns that resonate with broader organisational dynamics discussed in the literature. In other words, voluntary recommendations may translate into commitment, but they appear insufficient to alter behaviour in settings where convenience, autonomy, and established routines remain more influential.

4.4 Participation asymmetries

Finding 4. Participation asymmetries reveal structural inequalities in access.

Also, it should be noted that the top ten countries of origin cover 73.88% of the total participants, with three countries, the UK, the USA and Canada, forcing the use of aeroplanes and thus contributing significantly to total emissions. The geographical concentration of attendees may further indicate structural asymmetries in access and participation. While this pattern cannot be generalised beyond the specific event, it appears broadly consistent with established inequalities in research funding, institutional prestige, and global academic mobility (Cavusoglu *et al.*, 2023; Glover *et al.*, 2019).

Overall, these observations should not be interpreted as definitive evidence, but rather as an exploratory lens through which the persistence of high-carbon conference formats can be reconsidered. Furthermore, the given interpretation does not claim to attribute behavioural contradictions solely to individual inconsistency; instead, it highlights how these patterns appear consistent with the influence of organisational routines, incentive systems, and governance arrangements that continue to privilege established models.

At the same time, the dataset remains constrained in scope, focussing primarily on travel and accommodation practices. To address this limitation, the next stage of the research will broaden data collection across multiple conferences and geographical contexts, with particular attention to comparing mobility patterns against institutional privilege, regional carbon responsibilities, and the prestige dynamics embedded in academic travel. This further development is intended to strengthen the empirical grounding of the study and enable a more diagnostic and comparative assessment of alternative organisational models for sustainable conferencing.

5. Discussion

Building on the four empirical findings, this study moves beyond mere descriptions of contradictions that emerge in conference sustainability and approaches the environmental-organisational paradox as a governance issue within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). It

does not intend to attribute the coexistence of environmental awareness and high-carbon practices solely to individual inconsistency; instead, it suggests that these choices may reflect the interaction of competing institutional logics embedded in the academic organisations. In particular, the findings suggest a persistent dominance of prestige and efficiency logics over sustainability-oriented considerations, resulting in a mismatch between declared commitments and actual practices. As discussed, conferences can be observed at the intersection of multiple decision logics, one centred on prestige and international visibility, one concerned with logistical feasibility and resource constraints, and another oriented towards environmental and social responsibility. The preliminary evidence from the EGOS survey shows that, despite declared commitments to sustainability, mobility patterns and accommodation choices remain largely aligned with established expectations for physical presence and professional networking. While the data do not allow causal inference, they are consistent with the possibility that prestige and efficiency logics continue to outweigh soft sustainability criteria in institutional practices.

To further interpret these tensions and explore how alternative conference models can move beyond the single-location paradigm, the (E)ESG lens is translated into an operational framework aligned with scholarship on “practicing what we preach” in sustainable organising (adapted from [Krantz et al., 2022](#)). [Table 3](#) articulates four interrelated dimensions: Economic, Environmental, Social/DE&I, Governance, each specified through sub-dimensions with indicative metrics, potential data sources, and concrete conference examples.

This design serves two purposes: first, it makes the environmental-organisational paradox analytically tractable by highlighting the specific points at which sustainability goals collide with established academic routines, institutional incentives, and infrastructural arrangements. For instance, funding schemes that implicitly reward international travel while simultaneously increasing emissions, or the pursuit of hub parity that enhances accessibility yet raises challenges for ensuring comparable academic quality. Second, it links these tensions to barriers and drivers central to the research-in-progress: institutional inertia, logistical complexity, and resource asymmetries (barriers) versus regulatory pressures, reputational gains, and digital enablers (drivers).

By specifying indicators (e.g. per-capita travel emissions, geographic participation equity, governance transparency) and plausible data sources (surveys, carbon tracking, committee records), the framework provides a structured basis for examining how conference practices and organisational arrangements are shaped by institutional logics.

In this respect, the EGOS survey data have served as an exploratory starting point, suggesting the need for more systematic and comparable data collection across events.

While this framework provides measurable indicators to assess sustainability and inclusivity, its practical implementation depends on the broader institutional landscape of higher education. Despite growing awareness, systemic obstacles continue to hinder the operationalisation of sustainability principles in academic governance. Chief among these is the lack of shared metrics and standard procedures for monitoring environmental and social impacts, leading to fragmented, incomparable evaluations across institutions. The measurement gap is compounded by academic inertia, in which traditional norms of prestige, mobility, and productivity continue to shape decision-making, often at odds with sustainability commitments. Furthermore, governance asymmetries, in terms of uneven resource redistribution, authority structures, and regional representation, limit the diffusion of innovative formats such as multi-hub or hybrid conferences.

Recognising these institutional barriers and potential enablers is therefore crucial: they delineate the organisational conditions under which the (E)ESG framework can evolve from a conceptual model into a viable tool for driving sustainable transformation in academic event design. Finally, although developed around conference governance, the framework can be extended to broader organisational practices within HEIs, providing a structured approach to assessing how sustainability and inclusivity principles are operationalised within academic institutions.

Table 3. Operationalising the (E)ESG dimensions for systemic sustainability in higher education institutions

(E)ESG dimension	Sub-dimension	Operational/Key indicators	Possible data sources
Economic	Financial accessibility; value creation	- Registration costs relative to income levels - Sponsorship and redistribution mechanisms - ROI for institutions vs. inclusivity	Conference budgets, participant surveys, institutional funding reports
Environmental	Carbon emissions; resource use	- Carbon footprint per participant (travel, accommodation, food) - Use of digital vs. in-person formats - Waste and energy management	Carbon calculators, travel surveys, venue sustainability reports
Social	Equity, diversity, and inclusion (DE&I)	- Geographic distribution of attendees (countries, clusters) - Accessibility (disability, childcare, visas) - Gender and career-stage representation	Registration data, visa request and approval stats, DE&I self-reporting, accessibility audits
Governance	Transparency, accountability, decision-making	- Clarity of sustainability commitments - Digital sobriety - Transparency in offsets/funding - Representation in organising committees - Conference bidding processes - Mobility expectations	Conference governance charters, reporting systems, program committee data

(E)ESG dimension	Link to the environmental – organisational paradox	Examples in academic conferences as part of institutional policies and reporting frameworks
Economic	High fees or uneven funding streams reinforce inequalities between institutions and regions	Tiered registration fees; travel grants for underrepresented groups; shared funding pools across hubs
Environmental	Travel-intensive models maximise networking but increase emissions; digital formats reduce emissions but risk “Zoom fatigue” and loss of perceived quality. Prestige-driven mobility norms institutionalise high-carbon practices	Air vs. rail travel patterns; hotel eco-certifications; hybrid participation metrics
Social	Inclusion goals clash with logistical/economic priorities; multi-hub models may reduce travel barriers but risk unequal quality across hubs	Regional hubs enabling Global South access; visa-free participation through hybrid sessions; childcare support at venues
Governance	Governance structures often privilege established institutions, reinforcing existing hierarchies; offsetting practices may be symbolic	Public sustainability reports; diverse program committees; transparent carbon tracking dashboards

Source(s): Authors’ own work adapted from [Kranz et al. \(2022\)](#)

6. Implications for HEIs

Building on the framework and the preliminary empirical indications discussed above, several governance-related considerations emerge for HEIs. The discussion suggests the need for adjustments that go beyond mere technological fixes. If mobility-intensive practices are sustained not only by individual preferences but also by institutional incentive systems, then sustainability-oriented changes require working at the level of governance and evaluation criteria. Universities should critically reassess how travel funding schemes, promotion standards, and research evaluation metrics implicitly valorise international mobility and visibility and consider whether environmental and social indicators could be explicitly included in existing performance measures.

From an environmental perspective, developing shared, transparent carbon accounting procedures for academic events could help reduce fragmentation in measurement practices, enable comparability across institutions, and stimulate the adoption of best practices. To align conference organisation with climate commitments, a first step could be to integrate per-capita travel emissions or hybrid participation ratios into institutional sustainability reporting. From a social perspective, adopting hybrid or multi-hub formats would likely require explicit governance mechanisms to address resource asymmetries across institutions and regions, as well as disparities in bidding processes. This may include coordinated funding pools, minimum technological standards across hubs, and accountability mechanisms ensuring that DE&I objectives are tangibly pursued.

Finally, even though these considerations warrant further empirical validation, they suggest that conference governance represents a concrete entry point for fostering sustainability principles within the strategic and operational frameworks of HEIs.

7. Conclusions

This paper examined why carbon-intensive practices persist in academic conferences despite increasing sustainability commitments within higher education institutions (HEIs). The findings show that sustainability awareness alone does not translate into lower-impact behaviour, offering exploratory but consistent evidence: mobility and accommodation choices remain largely aligned with established expectations of physical presence, networking, and professional visibility. These patterns suggest that carbon-intensive practices are not simply the result of individual preferences, but are embedded in institutionalised mobility norms, incentive systems, and governance arrangements within HEIs.

In this context, the paper contributes to the literature on conference sustainability by shifting the analytical focus from environmental footprint and technical or technological solutions to an organisational governance perspective. While existing studies have mainly addressed how to design “greener” events, this study shows that the persistence of unsustainable practices is rooted in the interaction and collision of institutional logics that shape academic participation. The key transition is therefore from a focus on “green event design” to a focus on institutionalised mobility norms, incentives, and governance structures that keep sustaining existing models.

Within this perspective, the (E)ESG framework is not only used as a classificatory tool, but as an operational device to make the environmental-organisational paradox analytically tractable. By linking economic, environmental, social, and governance dimensions to concrete indicators and data sources, the framework provides a structured basis for assessing how different conference practices and organisational arrangements are shaped by, and can potentially reconfigure, institutional logics in HEIs.

Diving deeper, these insights have implications for conference governance and HEIs. If high-carbon practices are reinforced by incentive systems and evaluation criteria, then sustainability transitions require intervention at a governance level. This includes rethinking travel funding schemes, integrating environmental and social indicators into performance evaluation, and developing shared metrics for assessing the impact of academic gatherings.

Conference formats such as hybrid or multi-hub models may offer viable alternatives, but their adoption depends on addressing underlying asymmetries in resources, infrastructure, and institutional support.

Among the limitations of the study, the empirical evidence is based on a single conference and focuses primarily on travel and accommodation choices, which limits the generalisability of the findings and the ability to build causal inferences. In addition, the analysis does not capture the behaviour of virtual participants or the full range of organisational decision-making processes involved in conference design. Future research should expand the empirical base across multiple conferences, regions, and institutional contexts, and further investigate how governance mechanisms and incentive structures can enable or hinder more sustainable models of academic participation.

Finally, by conceptualising academic conferences as “testing grounds” where institutional logics are enacted and reproduced, this paper suggests that advancing (E)ESG sustainability assets in HEIs depends less on technological solutions alone and more on the reconfiguration of governance arrangements, incentive systems, and mobility norms that characterise the academic system.

Ethical statement

No formal ethics review was required for this study, as the anonymised survey data were collected from voluntary conference participants for descriptive purposes only and contained no identifiable or sensitive information.

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