

# The environmental burden of the international job market for economists

*Each year, the 'international job market for economists' involves over 1,000 junior candidates and several hundred recruiters from all over the world meeting for short pre-screening interviews at annual congresses in Europe and in the US, thus generating a momentous and avoidable global hypermobility. **Alberto Prati, Olivier Chanel and Morgan Raux** argue it is time to reassess this unsustainable recruitment system and estimates the carbon footprint of alternative systems.*

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Two years ago, Anna, a graduating PhD in Economics at the University of Stockholm, was considering jobs opportunities in Norway. She applied for a position in Oslo. Where did her first job interview take place? Not in Oslo, not online, and not even in Stockholm. The answer: in Rotterdam, The Netherlands. Anna was interviewed for a job at the University of Bergen, too. Strangely enough, she met the recruiting committee on the other side of the globe: in San Diego, California. Anna is a fictitious character, but her story has nothing implausible, and will be familiar to many graduating PhDs who lived similar experiences before the pandemic.

The international job market for economists is the reason for the ephemeral popularity of Rotterdam and San Diego among junior academics two years ago. This professional job market follows a standardised process where candidates apply to positions in the autumn, are pre-screened by prospective employers in the winter, and are subsequently invited for a seminar and a set of decisive interviews in the final phase, known as 'fly-out'. Job applications are made online, mostly via a non-profit platform, econjobmarket.org. Fly-outs are held in person, at the recruiting institution. But what about the pre-screening interviews? These interviews are typically short (25-30 minutes) and happen at the Annual Congress of the European Economic Association (EEA) or at the Annual Meeting of the American Economic Association (AEA). In the academic year 2019-2020, the EEA Congress took place in Rotterdam and the AEA Meeting in San Diego.

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These short interviews generate global hypermobility, at odds with economists' [ongoing research efforts to fight climate change](#). To attend the meetings in Rotterdam and San Diego, job market participants covered over 17 million kilometres, equivalent to more than 430 times the circumference of the earth. In a [recent study](#) we calculate how much this pre-screening process costs for the environment and propose some alternative solutions. Our paper belongs to a [research strand](#) which [estimates](#) the [environmental impact of academic conferences](#), and extends it to the case of a highly standardised professional labour market. Changing the design of this market represents a paradigmatic example of how market institutions can contribute a great deal to reducing greenhouse gas emissions.



Rotterdam and San Diego were the last cities to host job market meetings in person. The COVID-19 pandemic brought an unexpected disruption to the recruitment system, and the international job market for economists has been held entirely online for two years. In the coming months, the job market organisers will announce their official agenda for the next academic year. If the health crisis allows, will the pre-screening phase revive its pre-pandemic standards? We hope it will not. In this column, we map out three alternative solutions and the potential gains in terms of emissions and other costs. Our aim is to help economists rethink the profession's recruitment mechanism.

For our estimations, we used an anonymised dataset that was kindly provided by [econjobmarket.org](https://econjobmarket.org). The dataset contains information about over 1,000 candidates who attended at least an interview in San Diego, in Rotterdam, or in both places. We know the geographic origin of the candidates (from their IP address) and of the recruiters (from their institutional affiliations) as well as their destination (the meeting venue). We prudently assume that the recruiting committees are formed by two people only and that participants prefer to travel by train rather than plane for any itinerary shorter than six hours. The carbon footprints of the different scenarios are presented in Figure 1. Let us remind that these estimates refer to the pre-screening phase only: the environmental impact of the entire recruitment process (including the fly-out phase) is inevitably larger.

### **Scenario 0: Business as usual**

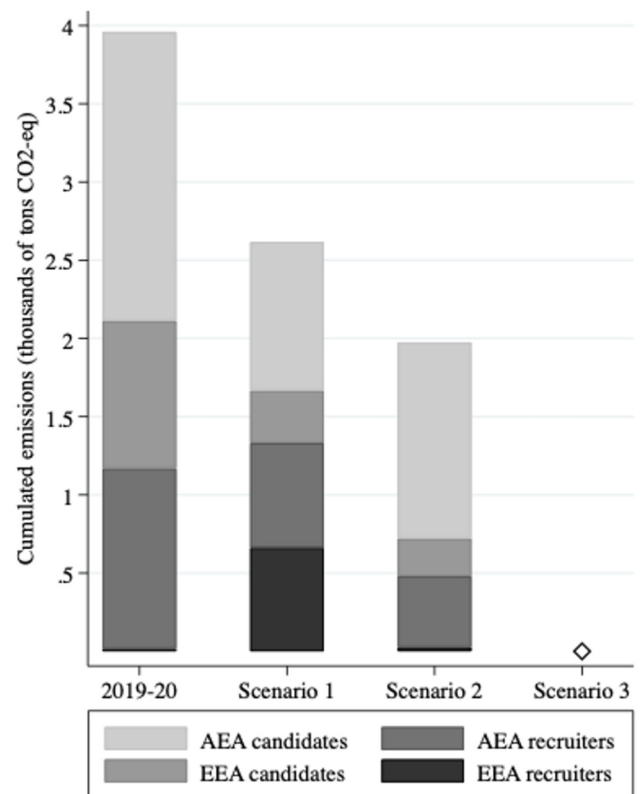
The 2019-2020 meetings in San Diego and Rotterdam generated about 4,000 tonnes CO<sub>2</sub>-eq, i.e. about 3.2 tonnes CO<sub>2</sub>-eq per participant. To have an [order of magnitude](#), a participant could compensate for these emissions by living car-free for one and a half years or going vegan for four years. Admittedly, San Diego is a particularly remote destination, and the choice of a more reachable venue would already bring some sizeable gains. For instance, if the AEA meeting took place in New York or Chicago instead, overall emissions would have been cut by about one-fourth. On top of climate-related costs (i.e. CO<sub>2</sub>-eq emissions), we also calculated the other environmental costs associated with transports (local air pollution, noise, congestion, well-to-tank, habitat) and other economic costs related to the meetings (private costs and time lost). When considering all these externalities, the comprehensive assessment of the 2019-20 meetings is €3.65 million.

### **Scenario 1: All recruiters conduct interviews at both annual meetings while candidates only go to the closest meeting**

This solution would cut emissions by one-third. In the current system, most recruiters attend only the closest meeting, while many candidates cross the Atlantic to attend the interviews. Given that the interviewed candidates are more numerous than the recruiters, it would be more efficient if the latter were available at each meeting instead. Importantly, recruiters should not invite Europe-based candidates for interviews in the US or US-based candidates for interviews in Europe. Thus, the paradoxical case of a European resident interviewing in the US for a job in Europe (as was the case for Anna in our initial example) would be avoided.

### Scenario 2: Recruiters and candidates attend only the closest annual meeting in-person

This solution would cut emissions by half. Intercontinental air transportation is the biggest entry in the CO<sub>2</sub>-eq bill, and its elimination can bring a huge environmental gain without major changes in the job market organisation. This solution may sound unfair, since it puts candidates from different continents on an unequal footing. However, this inequality is already present in the current system, where a candidate who is interviewed in another continent pays higher costs in terms of time, stress, jetlag, and, of course, money than a next-door candidate. Scenario 2 applies an explicit rule to coordinate the job market actors on a practice that is common in most professions: candidates who live far away are interviewed online, while candidates who live closer are interviewed in person.



### Scenario 3: Recruiters and candidates meet online

This solution would nearly eliminate the environmental costs associated with pre-screening interviews. Importantly, it would not prevent face-to-face interactions between shortlisted candidates and recruiters, who would still meet in person during the fly-out phase. Incidentally, Scenario 3 could make the job market fairer. Online meetings would eliminate the financial barriers that prevent candidates without affluent sponsors from attending the job market meetings. In addition, online interviews could be recorded, archived, and watched asynchronously, thus facilitating the introduction of hiring practices that reduce [biases and noise](#).

## Conclusion

The ongoing edition of the job market is taking place online, thus offering a good opportunity to reconsider the previous unsustainable recruitment system in economics. It is a [pressing responsibility](#) for our profession [to do more in fighting climate change](#). A good start is to look at the plank in our own eye.

*This blogpost draws on, [Chanel, O, A Prati and M Raux \(2021\), "The environmental cost of the international job market for economists", CEP Discussion Paper No. 1819.](#)*

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

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