United Nations institute pilots carbon tax for staff air travel: Because ‘Climate Action’ starts at home (#SDG13)

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MAASTRICHT – The UN’s research and training institute in the Netherlands, UNU-MERIT, has introduced a carbon ‘tax’ on air travel for its more than 100 staff and researchers. As of 1 January 2019, all business travel by plane will incur an additional premium, which will be used to offset carbon emissions.

Part of a broader programme encompassing the use of solar panels, factory water to heat and cool offices, and vegan lunch options, the new tax will make the institute more sustainable in its operations as well as its structure.

An initiative of Director Prof. Bart Verspagen, the tax will give a clear incentive to fly less – in an effort to change institutional culture and individual behaviour. This will be a tax taken from project budgets, i.e. funders will have to be convinced to pay more or the premium will simply be taken from project expenses.

“I hope our example will encourage other UN bodies to follow suit,” said Verspagen. “I also hope our local University of Maastricht will follow, so that everyone is treated equally. But overall, as an academic community and a UN organisation, I believe we must act now. Climate change is real and low-lying countries are on the front line worldwide: from Micronesia in the Pacific to right here in the Netherlands.”

Crunching numbers, cutting carbon

The plan will use online carbon calculators, based on miles and class travelled. Although calculators cannot typically measure wind conditions or aircraft efficiency, the institute plans to use ‘gold standard’ certified schemes, thus making sure that the money raised will be invested in high quality projects that truly make a difference in terms of the provision of sustainable energy. The tax will be collected locally every 3-6 months and offset in a lump sum.

“Long-distance video communication is already a viable alternative,” said Verspagen. “Going further, holographic technology has also been used by politicians to go on tour, so why not in academic and UN circles? Most negatives effects of NOT being at a particular meeting can be mitigated by using that kind of technology.”

“Although relationship building is important – and I’ve done research on this myself, on technology spillovers and the importance of local, face-to-face meetings – so is the Environment. On balance, that is the priority. Of course there are limitations, but set against the recent warnings from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, we need to act now to change both individual and institutional behaviour.”

The tax will likely be a small amount, e.g. 10 euros for a flight within Europe, rising to 100 euros for an inter-continental flight.

Note to Editors: *The United Nations University – Maastricht Economic and Social Research Institute on Innovation and Technology (UNU-MERIT) is a research and training institute of United Nations University based in Maastricht in the south of the Netherlands. The institute explores the social, political and economic factors that drive technological innovation, with a particular focus on creation, diffusion and access to knowledge. For more details: http://www.merit.unu.edu/about-us/.* (Media: Flickr / Ben)

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