

YAT position on carbon pricing for business flights at the UT

CO2 goals: YAT agrees with the ambition that the UT will decrease the CO2 emissions by 55% in 2030, *leading by example*. We observe that flying contributes to the CO2 emissions. The current SEE proposal for a UT CO2 reduction-pricing and compensation plan intends to create a penalty for flying and an incentive for sustainability initiatives at the UT. *Here, we express our support for and concerns regarding the proposal.*

Conscious decisions: Since technological solutions are not available in the short term, we emphasize that behavioural change is needed to reach these goals, which comes down to decision-making. The situation after the pandemic shows that currently, “we” are only making small steps towards reaching our sustainability goals. Incentives might therefore be needed. *We support the SEE proposal as a first step towards clearer decisions towards more sustainable business travel.*

Embedding in the big picture: The climate crisis is a global challenge. “The only way to fix that is through politics, policymakers and legislation” (NY Times, [Opinion](#), Aug 31, 2021). Universities have large influence on the political system. In addition to leading by example, the (Dutch) universities must continue using their influence and network towards conscious political decisions towards climate neutrality – not only setting CO2 emission goals, but also introducing measures to reach these goals. In the context of the SEE proposal, we note that while the reduction of individual flights is important, the impact might be less significant compared to larger, more systematic changes.

Flight-alternatives and decreasing flight emissions: We support the motivation of moving away from CO2-compensation schemes towards decreasing the actual emissions, which is part of the motivation of the current proposal by SEE. We stand behind the train-map initiative to advertise flying alternatives and urge the steering group to ensure that the intended funds will be used directly for incentivizing and facilitating travel with low CO2 emissions. An additional small step to decrease CO2 emissions might be to incentivize choosing the plane connection with the lowest CO2 emissions for the business flights that are selected as “necessary”.

Implementation and monitoring of the proposal: The plan outlines various implementation options, but all come with administrative burdens. Ensuring compliance and effective monitoring, especially at the individual level, may prove challenging. Streamlining these processes and minimizing administrative overhead are essential for the plan’s success. It is even unclear what percentage of the “carbon price” will go to administration and monitoring costs rather than towards the incentive funds. A further concern is that the steering effect of the penalty may remain limited unless the financial incentive is increased compared to the values mentioned in the proposal.

Comparison to best practices: We recommend monitoring the experiences (positive and negative) at other institutions. For example, TU Delft has an internal carbon tax, 150 €/tonne of CO2-equivalent. The income is transferred to a fund for sustainable projects, pilots and actions, and for sustainable travel, e.g. compensating for rail travel prices. TU Delft also assures that the travel agency always recommends the most sustainable travel option before booking a flight.

Funding: At the time of writing, it is unclear how the penalty per flight will be paid: project money (of individual researchers or research groups), or first money stream of the department. As stated in the proposal, the UT is striving to decrease overall traveling costs. We note that the

plan's ambition is to decrease the number of business flights, which is in line with the current needs. We emphasize that the extra costs resulting from the CO2 price should be ideally used to supplement more sustainable travel alternatives, to avoid an increase in traveling costs.

(In)equality: It is currently unclear how a fair distribution of the remaining CO2 budget for air travel across UT employees will be achieved. According to the proposal, this is intended as an action point in the implementation phase. The plan could benefit from ensuring that the financial and administrative burdens do not fall disproportionately on certain groups. For example, postdocs and young academics, who typically have less resources available, may experience additional restrictions compared to their supervisors. Within the current proposal, achieving a balanced distribution of the CO2 budget comes down to the question: Who decides on the necessity of the travel? We suggest that decision-makers at the UT or faculty levels include measures to ensure a fair distribution. Clear guidelines and support systems should be in place to ensure fairness and equity across faculties and departments. This is especially important for young academics, as further motivated below.

Mobility and International Collaborations: Our mobility and international collaborations are essential for our visibility and research and teaching activities, both on individual and on organizational levels. For example, visibility of UT researchers is crucial for becoming part of consortia and attracting talents and funding. Individual visibility is especially important for early-career researchers, who are building their network and building up research groups, relying on attracting external talent and funding from the 2nd and 3rd money streams. Furthermore, certain funding schemes (e.g., Horizon 2020 projects) may require researchers to travel as part of the terms and conditions. While we agree with the general goal and motivation of the proposal, we note that implementing a financial burden on flights could disproportionately affect early-career researchers and those in need of international exposure. The plan should include provisions to support essential travel for young researchers, ensuring that their career development and UT's visibility are not compromised disproportionately.

Looking ahead: As YAT, we would be happy to be involved in discussing traveling needs and designing travel-related emission-reduction policies. We agree with the motivation of the current proposal – the need to reduce CO2 emissions from business travel and we want to contribute to shaping an efficient, effective and fair policy.