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UCT tobacco taxation and illicit trade e-library a world first

A comprehensive [new e-library](#) focusing on tobacco taxation and illicit trade has been launched by the World Health Organization (WHO) Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) Knowledge Hub at the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Research Unit on the Economics of Excisable Products (REEP).

The project, a two-and-a-half-years in the making, is set to be a valuable resource for students, researchers and policymakers across the globe. Covering a range of different dissemination modes — from journal articles and presentations, to data sets and grey literature — the purpose of the e-library is to consolidate and classify all available literature on tobacco taxation and illicit trade in tobacco products.

Currently, the library includes links to more than 1 700 entries and will continue to be updated on a regular basis.

While other e-libraries focusing on the economics of tobacco do exist, the WHO FCTC Knowledge Hub at REEP's e-library is the first of its kind focusing specifically on the aspects of taxation and illicit trade, says Professor Corne Van Walbeek, director of REEP.

"It's a well-known fact that increasing the excise tax on cigarettes and tobacco products is the single most important way of reducing tobacco use," says Van Walbeek.

"So, the idea with the e-library was to consolidate the substantial body of work on tobacco taxation and illicit trade in tobacco products that already exists to make it easier for interested parties – whether academics, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) or policymakers – to access relevant information within a few clicks."

As programme manager of the WHO FCTC Knowledge Hub on tobacco taxation and illicit trade within REEP, Samantha Filby was the designated person for the job. "One of our responsibilities is to disseminate information to parties in the FCTC treaty," she explains. "We were doing this through a 'Resource' tab on our website but realised that a comprehensive e-library would make for a much more user-friendly solution."

According to Van Walbeek, the e-library is an excellent resource for anyone interested in research on tobacco taxation and illicit trade. This may include researchers, students, thinktanks and NGOs, as well as policymakers who are potentially interested in information regarding the countries they work in as well as global best practice.

“We want to have as many people as possible accessing the e-library,” he says. “We believe that it’s relatively user-friendly and allows people to get relevant information with the click of a few buttons.”

Maintaining the e-library and keeping it up to date with the latest research on tobacco taxation and illicit trade in tobacco is Filby’s next big challenge.

While she is currently adding documents manually on a regular basis, automation plans using natural language processing (NLP) are in the pipeline. NLP is a field of Artificial Intelligence – in the form of an algorithm - that enables machines to read, understand and derive meaning from human languages. “The idea is that we feed the machine the 1 700 articles that I’ve already classified as a kind of training exercise,” says Filby.

By doing this, the algorithm will be able to ‘learn’ which articles are relevant and, furthermore, how to categorise them appropriately in the e-library. Of course, this process cannot happen overnight and Filby foresees about six months to a year of working closely with data science consultants on the machine learning project.

[Visit the library](#)

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