



Explanatory statement on collaboration with the fossil fuel industry

March 2024

Introduction

The science is very clear: the climate and biodiversity crises are among the greatest challenges facing our society. To prevent the serious consequences of climate change and to limit the rise in global temperature to 1.5 degrees Celsius, with a 50% probability, worldwide CO₂ emissions must be halved by 2030 compared to 2019 levels, and reduced to zero by 2050¹. If fossil fuels continue to be produced at the current level, this limit of 1.5 degrees Celsius will be exceeded in the future. This means that society has to commit to achieving the transition to a low-carbon future. At the same time, fossil fuel companies have to reduce their production considerably and with immediate effect².

Universities' collaboration with the fossil fuel industry has recently caused considerable concern both within and outside the university community. Some 450 students and staff from Leiden University took part in an open debate on this issue, students occupied the Lipsius building, a petition was submitted and the issue was the subject of much media commentary, both locally and further afield. The complexity of this issue has divided the community. Conversely, different perspectives are crucial if we are to resolve this issue. An academic environment is an ideal place not only to work together to examine these perspectives but also to try to understand one another's viewpoints and to seek nuance together.

Leiden University decided in 2023, as a first step, to look more critically at new partnerships with the fossil fuel industry, and to be completely open about this. In August 2023 a list was published of current research collaborations with the fossil fuel industry. The list will be updated on an annual basis.

The university wants to do more. In 2023 a start was made on developing a generic assessment framework that will help us make choices: who do we want to collaborate with, and who not? This framework will include criteria for handling ethical aspects involved in

¹ <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/>

² [Existing fossil fuel extraction would warm the world beyond 1.5 °C - IOPscience](#)

collaboration with the fossil fuel industry, and can also be used for themes such as knowledge security and human rights that also need a well-defined framework. In this way, we will not only consider whether each collaboration project fits with our broader vision of collaboration, but will also take a more critical look at whom we collaborate with.

We will use this assessment framework for collaboration with the fossil fuel industry to consider the extent to which potential partners contribute positively or negatively to the energy transition and how this bears on the scientific significance of a project. By adhering to this, we will ensure that, if we want to curtail a particular partnership, we do this in a clear and properly substantiated manner. This assessment framework will also give researchers a clearer decision-making structure for their activities, in addition to the current regulations on working with third parties.

For collaboration with the fossil fuel industry, we first looked at principles for collaboration, prompted in part by social and scientific developments relating to this topic. These principles are included in a statement on collaboration with the fossil fuel industry.

Definition and intended scope

The following parameters have been used as the starting point in our statement on collaboration with the fossil fuel industry:

- A **research project** with a company in the fossil fuel industry is a project where funds or a contribution in kind is received to carry out the research. This can be both a bilateral and a broader project (consortium).
- The statement does not apply to **educational activities** carried out in collaboration with the fossil fuel industry, such as business fairs, guest lectures and alumni meetings or activities with study associations.
- **Fossil fuel industry:** We take the fossil fuel industry to mean companies that are engaged in the exploration, extraction and exploitation of fossil fuels such as oil, coal and gas. Shell and Exxon Mobil are examples of such companies. Companies that support the fossil fuel industry (for example, banks and insurance companies) do not fall under the definition as applied in this statement.

- **Paris Agreement:** In 2016 the European Union, including the Netherlands, signed the Paris Agreement. The agreement aims to keep global warming well below 2 degrees Celsius and to pursue efforts to limit it to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Agreements have been made at the European level to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement. The EU member states have agreed that they will reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 55% by 2030. The EU wants to be climate neutral by 2050. This means net zero greenhouse gas emissions by that time. The goal of the Netherlands is to reduce its CO₂ emissions by 55% by 2030 compared to 1990. To compensate for any setbacks, the government is aiming for a higher target, amounting to approximately 60%³. All sectors are being asked for an extra contribution. The nature of this contribution is based on the possibilities within the sectors to reduce their CO₂ emissions more rapidly up to 2030.

Statement on collaboration with the fossil fuel industry

On 12 March 2024, the following statement was drawn up by the Executive Board of Leiden University, following consultation with and input from the University Council, the student and staff participation body. This statement may become more stringent or be supplemented or amended in some other way if it becomes apparent that the contributions to the Paris climate goals or the energy transition cannot be adequately demonstrated and/or if societal developments or circumstances necessitate this.

- *Leiden University will not enter into any new research partnerships with companies in the fossil fuel industry that are not intensively and demonstrably committed to achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement.*
- *Exceptions will only be made if a project clearly contributes to the energy transition. In this case, too, the necessity of collaborating with such a company will be assessed: a possible reason for cooperation could be, for example, because the company holds data that is essential for the research or knowledge that contributes in some other way to the energy transition.*
- *Projects that do not contribute to the energy transition but are carried out with companies that do commit to the Paris climate goals will also be assessed.*
- *Current projects that do not meet these conditions will be completed.*

³ [Extra package of measures closes the gap in the 2030 climate goal | Rijksoverheid.nl](#)

With this statement the university wants to send a strong signal to companies in the fossil fuel industry that do not adhere to the Paris climate goals. Exceptions can be made: for example, a project that is to be carried out with a company that does not align with the Paris climate goals may nonetheless be judged important for speeding up the energy transition. It must then be demonstrated that a more sustainable partner is not available.

By looking critically at companies' performances, we want to avoid the possibility of research findings, besides their original goal, being used for greenwashing. We will also look critically at whether projects carried out in collaboration with the fossil fuel industry will contribute to the envisaged goal. These could, for example, be projects of a much more fundamental nature where it is often unclear whether they really will contribute to the intended future transitions. We will, where possible, include guidelines for this in the assessment framework for collaboration with the fossil fuel industry.

Next steps

These principles for collaboration with the fossil fuel industry will be further developed in 2024 into an assessment framework. Formulating assessment criteria will be no easy task. It is at present not possible to properly quantify the contributions of companies to achieving the Paris climate goals. Many different factors, including geopolitical developments, play a role here. Organisations do exist that carry out assessments of the performance of companies in the fossil fuel industry, but these are less focused on individual projects. At the European level, from 2024 listed companies have a reporting obligation regarding CO₂ emissions and decarbonisation strategies. In the coming period we will examine the assessment criteria that are important for evaluating performance with regard to the Paris Agreement and speeding up the energy transition. We will consult, among others, experts on the climate, energy systems and scenarios and the industrial transformation to low CO₂ energy systems.

Learning organisation

The principle of restricting collaboration with external parties is new territory for our university, and we have limited experience with this. This statement therefore brings with it dilemmas regarding our broader vision of collaboration. In our Strategic Plan *Innovating and Connecting – 2022-2027* we made the conscious decision to strengthen all our connections: between different disciplines, with society and within our academic community. Collaboration with partners, including companies in the fossil fuel industry, is an integral part of this vision. We are therefore reluctant to categorically and completely exclude partners from the academic world from the outset. We regard it as an important

aspect of science to remain in discussion with partners, even those with whom we may disagree. We have therefore decided not to impose a moratorium, temporary or otherwise, on the fossil fuel industry because this would exclude partners without relying on a clear decision framework. Until this assessment framework has been established, researchers will continue to make their own judgements regarding individual projects.

As well as concerns about greenwashing, a further topic of debate is frequently mentioned: the dilemma of academic freedom. Some parties believe restricting academic freedom for ethical reasons is justified. Conversely, other parties believe it is ethically irresponsible to restrict academics who are committed to achieving transitions in collaboration with the fossil fuel industry. We see comparable dilemmas in the areas of knowledge security and human rights. Collaboration with particular organisations and countries can be a basis for peace. On the other hand, collaboration can lead to an unacceptable risk. Even with our assessment frameworks, there will still be a grey area that we will have to live with.

In 2023, Leiden University established the Academic Freedom Core Team to bring greater clarity to academic freedom and responsibility. This team is engaged in considering these dilemmas and in 2024 will produce a report with recommendations for a 'Leiden approach' aimed at protecting and promoting academic freedom in present-day society.

It will be extremely important in the coming years for us as a university to continue to invest in our organisation's learning process in dealing with these issues, raising awareness and building 'jurisprudence'. Ensuring diligence and transparency in the processes and justifying the choices made are crucial here. In line with this, those projects that have been assessed and subsequently proceed will therefore be added to the list of partnerships with the fossil fuel industry.