



**University
of Antwerp**

Debating Development Group assignment

Re-imagining the University: Addressing academic ties to
Fossil Fuel Industry: moving forward

2023-2024

Catherine Avi, Jonas Hilbert, Reda Koubaá, Rune De Keye & Seppe Jansen

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Introduction

In this essay, we chose to focus on a problem that is inseparably intertwined with the neoliberal trend we are seeing across universities. The idea of applying the core principles of neoliberalism to universities began in the late 20th century. As a result, we see that many western countries began to implement policy reforms aimed at reducing government involvement in higher education and promoting more market-based approaches.

In the neoliberal context, it is notable that there is an increased emphasis on applied research, that has immediate practical applications and economic value. Declining government funding has left institutions looking for alternative sources of income to continue their activities. Collaborations with industries can thereby provide the funding the university needs for its research. We may question to what extent such private funding influences the universities research agenda, whereby priority may be granted to projects that align with industry interests over those with broader societal implications.

This is nothing new, universities have had longstanding connections with industry in various fields, fulfilling a range of (mutual) purposes, such as obtaining research funding, gaining political support and facilitating communication. Simultaneously, universities position themselves as front runners in dealing with climate change, promoting so-called sustainability and peace, and fostering social transformation. In the case of partnerships between universities and the fossil fuel industry, we may wonder how their values and goals align? A critical examination of the potential impact on academic values, research priorities and institutional autonomy is essential to ensure that these kinds of partnerships contribute positively to both the academic and societal goals of universities.

Over the years, there have been numerous publications and discussions about the changes and new policies introduced in universities. Student movements and university officials have conducted research and taken positions on the consequences of commercialization, competitive orientation, and other aspects of neoliberalization of universities. In particular, the contradictions between these seemingly opposing discourses of universities and the fossil fuel industry are brought up for discussion.

To further elaborate on the potential consequences of the university-fossil fuel industry ties, we will draw on the readings and texts provided to us in the Debating Development classes, as well as our own experiences as students at the University of Antwerp. As we are a diverse group, including students from different disciplines such as communication studies, political and economic sciences, sociology and philosophy, we naturally have different opinions on who is responsible for addressing these kinds of problematic ties with fossil industries and what is the best way to do so. What we all agree on is that the university cannot be reduced to an institution where people come to get their degree. Instead, it is an interactive place in which students are an equal and important part. This implies that we as students must be active and put uncomfortable topics on the agenda if we want the university to be a place that brings a positive transformation in society.

In what follows we will discuss some details about the prevalence and which universities are subject to these types of collaborations, then we will explain what exactly these collaborations entail. Finally, we will discuss the ethical aspect of these types of collaborations, and in the conclusion, we will come up with some proposals to make academic-industry collaborations more credible and trustworthy.

Data: What cooperations do exist?

Why is it important to take a closer look at the extent of these cooperations? The main reason is that the companies try to gain influence through these fundings. They actively participate in designing university degree programs which are in favor of their goals and policies. In some universities they even managed to establish some sort of countermovement against their critiques by setting up panels on how to react to environmental movements. If there are no such discussions, they still have an influence on how universities react to such movements (Corderoy et al., 2023) Probably the biggest problem regarding this topic is the fact that we do not know the full extent of these cooperations and probably will never know (Matthews et al., 2023).

Caused by the fact that it is hard to get the data needed, it is nearly impossible to give a detailed picture of how close the cooperations really are. In general, it is estimated that European Universities received around 260 million euro since 2016 in fundings from oil, gas, and mining companies. We can't break it down in great detail, but we have some numbers. British universities received from Shell around 62 million euros since 2016 (Matthews et al., 2023). If we speak in general, British universities received 147 million pounds in this period (Corderoy et al., 2023). This is followed by Norwegian universities who received around 68 million euros in the same period. It is important to mention that these funds aren't exclusively from Shell. Another general number concerns Spanish universities who received around 5.2 million euros in the last years. The Eni company who is mostly active in Italy donated roughly 10 million euros to Italian universities. If we're not looking at specific amounts of funding, a Greenpeace analysis shows that out of a 103 French research bodies, more than half of them had cooperations with such companies (Matthews et al., 2023). If we look at Great Britain, we know at least 60 universities who received such fundings (Corderoy et al., 2023).

As we can see, it is quite difficult to get a general impression on the European level. Even though there are some numbers, they are mostly not relating to each other. Often there are some numbers for single universities, these numbers are interesting and there should be more universities who are as transparent as they are, but these single numbers are not a sufficient database if we want to draw conclusions on a general level. What we can say despite these difficulties is that these fundings are not something special but more a norm or common thing for European universities.

The kinds of alliances between European universities and fossil fuel companies

Due to a lack of transparency on data and information of the partnerships, we wanted to get a clearer vision of what the partnerships consist of. We noted down the most popular kinds of alliances between different universities and fossil fuel companies. It is important to know that every contract is different, and not all universities accept all the alliances mentioned below. We can even categorize Belgian universities from others, but for the sake of clarity, here you find the most returning alliances.

Joint research

Universities partner up with fuel companies with the intention of developing innovative technologies. Companies also use certain technology advancements and research findings that the universities provide to be able to use them in their industry. In addition, they can explore extraction methods in

this way and the most important reason of joint research; to address (or justify) the concern that rises when thinking of the environment related to these companies.

Sponsorships and funding

A typical marketing strategy that many fossil fuel companies use to gain visibility, exposure and community engagement is through sponsorships and funding. Providing funds can be through different ways (grants, scholarships etc.) and this gives the companies some type of recognition. Sponsorships are not always grandiose, this can also mean sponsoring certain events, specific research centers or even conferences.

Policy, advocacy, and social responsibility

The collaborations can often be related to research about energy policy and sustainable practices. These kinds of collaboration allegedly exist to shape public opinion and to influence policy decisions, which is rather problematic. And this brings us to social responsibility. Companies are engaging with universities to enhance their initiatives by financially supporting universities.

Schooling and coaching

Universities often have specialized courses or programs set up by the fuel industry. The aim is to start a program or course that aligns with the industry. Think of internships for example or training initiatives.

Infrastructure and facilities

When doing research, equipment, intelligence, workforce, testing and so much more aspects are needed to complete it successfully. The benefits are efficiency, cost cuts, long-term partnerships and obviously: certainty and protection for these companies.

These reasons/ kinds of partnerships seem quite reasonable, yet society is torn on what to think. On the one hand, it is great that students get the chance to study at the university that they want, without worrying about money. It is nice that universities get different funds besides those of our governments. Internships lead to jobs, which then also allows students to get fixed jobs, different experiences, and a lot of networking. On the other hand, a lot of people see through the fuel industry and find it clear that they don't really care about schooling, internships etc. but they rather do it because they also gain a lot out of it.

For example: the facilities they get, the technology, the research findings and so much more. But for some, it is clear that the biggest win would be the cleansing of their reputation. Striving for a better climate and more sustainability while being responsible for 89% of the world's emissions is something that our society does not take lightly.

So overall, their joint projects don't seem to be 'bad' or unreasonable, but there is an ongoing discussion on the integrity of universities and the sincerity of the fossil fuel industry.

Stepping away from this practical/ financial perspective and diving into an ethical perspective, the next section is coming up with ethical arguments that are an important part of this ongoing discussion. It is crucial to mention and explain them in order to fully understand this conflict.

Ethical reflection on university-industry partnerships with fossil fuel companies

It is said that cooperation between universities and industry promotes scientific research, or that it helps strengthen the competitiveness of businesses and therefore contributes to socio-economic prosperity. But when did this become the role of university? And what about the philosophical, sociological, and cultural aspects of human life as research objects? Sociologist Lawrence Busch argues that universities have become the linchpin of what is called "academic capitalism". According to the fossil fuel industry, the purpose of universities is not intellectual exploration but rather the production of marketable knowledge. This explains why large companies are increasingly outsourcing their research activities to academic institutions (Rosier & Van Hecken, 2022).

Therefore, it is crucial that university boards ask themselves critical and ethical questions, with the values and integrity of their institutions in mind, when engaging in relationships with industrial partners. In the case of the fossil fuel industry, it is hard to believe that their goals are compatible with university values.

The European University Association emphasizes that education, research, and innovation are essential for attaining sustainable development as defined by the UN sustainable development goals. As a result, universities are expected to play their part in achieving these goals, by relying on knowledge, new research, and citizens stimulated by critical thinking (European University Association, 2022). So far, we have seen that it is easy to make grandiose claims about sustainability, though some of them may be getting ahead of reality. For universities, the first step towards sustainability is to radically reduce the carbon footprint and renounce (research) funding from the fossil fuel industry. Unfortunately, we must conclude that the contrary is happening.

From the data reviewed above, it has become clear that Fossil fuel companies' contributions to universities are not just philanthropic but that those donations and fundings are part of a carefully constructed smokescreen, a smokescreen that disguises their role in a crisis they perpetuate and helps them gain false legitimacy. By doing so they win influence on climate change-related research. According to Derounian (2022) universities and colleges justified these fundings by encouraging fossil fuel producers to switch to greener technologies. Even if this were so, it certainly means that researchers are giving their name and prestige to the current "dirty producers", which in turn can prolong the bad behaviour of companies and give them credits by association. From our perspective it seems that their investments in 'sustainable projects' are merely an attempt to greenwash their image while continuing their polluting practices. At worst, they are trying to manipulate research and teachings so that fossil fuels have a part to play in our energy future.

Universities across Europe have accepted millions in funding from oil, gas and mining companies since 2016. An investigation by Investigate Europe together with OpenDemocracy has found that fossil fuel firms have injected at least €260 million into research, tuition fees, sponsorships, and grants at some of Europe's leading universities (Matthews et al., 2023). These findings provoke legitimate concerns about industry influence in academic research. French oil group Total dismissed such concerns, stressing that academic independence is always guaranteed. The oil and gas giant said universities and

other institutions "are not selling their souls to the devil by engaging with them". A statement that nicely illustrates the smokescreen metaphor, given that Total was formally prosecuted for greenwashing and ecocide in 2021. The French court launched an investigation following complaints from environmental NGOs, who claimed that the oil giant is directly responsible for significant air pollution and environmental lies (Messad, 2023). But the industry's role at universities goes beyond funding. In Italy, for example, Eni is represented on at least four university steering committees. And a Greenpeace analysis last year of 103 French public research bodies, showed that more than half had links to Total.

This kind of industry interference in academic research has affected UK universities to an even worse extent. An article by OpenDemocracy reveals that Fossil fuel companies have been given "horrifying" influence over academic degree courses. They claim that BP, Shell and Equinor are among the companies routinely invited to private meetings with university officials, with some institutions taking direct advice on how to conduct engineering and geoscience degrees and how to push back against "anti-oil rhetoric" (Corderoy et al., 2023). In addition, universities such as Oxford, Edinburgh and University College London have admitted they have adopted advice from fossil fuel companies on how to respond to questions from students and journalists, as well as inviting companies to sit on advisory boards. When OpenDemocracy sent requests under the Freedom of Information Act, several universities refused to disclose documents relating to these companies and their collaboration, claiming it would "harm" commercial interests.

These collaborations also exist closer to home. At our own university, a lecture series on sustainability was sponsored by ExxonMobil, Total Energies, BASF and INEOS. We may ask ourselves how this is compatible with Uantwerpen's core values and goals, which according to their website are: having an impact on the world, connection, innovation and quality. It also says that, as a university, their ambition is to improve society in a sustainable way. We are yet to witness concrete examples of that.

Several student associations, activist groups, researchers, and professors at universities have expressed their distaste regarding these dubious collaborations and are pleading for the cutting of university-fossil fuel industry ties. They are concerned about their academic freedom and the impact of climate change on current and future generations, as well as the context in which academics must work, one where fossil fuel industry funding can taint critical climate-related research. It is crucial that leading institutions use their influence and resources to signal the urgent need for climate action (Fossil Free Research, 2023).

This sort of intermingling of interests is damaging academic freedom and independent research, which should be the highest virtue of universities. Moreover, donations from fossil fuel companies pose reputational risks for academic institutions. The time has come for universities in Europe to be transparent about what they are investing in and what goals they're trying to achieve, as well as taking a stronger stance on where they get their funding from.

Conclusion

In this essay, we focused on one of the ways in which neoliberalism and its profit motive affects our university, namely the problematic ties present between the fossil fuel industry and universities in Europe. We showed through data analyses and some examples that these ties are still very strong today. For example, we outlined some situations where people connected to fossil fuel companies were allowed to sit on boards of the universities themselves and described the large amount of funding that universities still receive from the big polluters. Partnering with fossil fuel giants will not overlook the fact that their climate-destroying pollution jeopardizes the future of young people.

We then problematized these connections by pointing to the university's own discourse on sustainability and the possibility of greenwashing companies destroying our environment. Thus, we believe that Neutrality, as Herman Van Goethem advocates in this situation, cannot be possible. He argues that the universities need to advocate for neutrality and evaluate projects on the merits of the concrete project. We tried to reason that neutrality in this case isn't an option, because of the university's own discourse and the problematic situations of vague boundaries between industry and universities across Europe. We also tried to make the case for transparency. In a world where rectors tell the world universities should be neutral, universities should at least be transparent about what they are getting in return for working with these companies. Transparency and non-neutrality concerning collaborations with fossil fuel companies are absolutely essential if we want to tackle the issues that our society is facing.

Luckily, universities aren't places where only one man can decide. We students, professors, cleaning personnel are all part of the university, and hopefully we aren't as immovable and unchangeable as the buildings where we take our courses. It is our job, all together, to make sure that these issues are problematized so that the university moves, changes and together we leave the world a little better than how we inherited it. In our accompanying podcast we will talk about ways in which we as students can try to impact relevant issues.

Contribution recognition

As a group, we collectively decided on internal deadlines and distributed the workload by delegating tasks:

C.A.: wrote the part on kinds of alliances and did the lay-out of the essay.

J.H.: wrote the data part and a paragraph of our view on the university's role.

R.K.: moderated the podcast and checked the spelling/grammar.

R.D.K.: wrote the introduction and the ethical reflection on collaborations in the essay.

S.J.: wrote the conclusion.

All authors provided critical feedback and helped shape the essay.

We all participated actively and put the same amount of work in the podcast.

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