

WHY ENGAGING WITH THE FOSSIL FUEL INDUSTRY WILL NEVER GET RESULTS

Fossil Free Careers demands that fossil fuel companies, in their entirety, are excluded from universities' careers and recruitment activities.

That means **no engagement** with the industry in this area whatsoever – and here's why:

WHAT'S THE CONTEXT?

University management will sometimes try to argue that we should work with fossil fuel companies rather than excluding them. They may try to adopt a position that looks like a compromise with student campaigners - for example, say that they will "place extra scrutiny" on fossil fuel companies before allowing them to advertise - rather than excluding them outright. However, these so-called "compromise" positions often only serve to obscure the harm that the fossil fuel industry continues to perpetrate, and the university's role in upholding this harm.

We argue that working with the fossil fuel industry, in any form, is not good enough. Fossil fuel companies are intrinsically bound up with environmental destruction, human rights abuses, and the escalating climate crisis: the bare minimum that our universities can do is to stop them from advertising their destructive jobs to students. Below, we outline some of our reasoning, which you may want to use when negotiating with your university's management or careers service.

WHY ADVOCATE FOR A FULL EXCLUSION OF FOSSIL FUEL COMPANIES?

Put simply, there is no such thing as an ethical fossil fuel company. Whether they are violently displacing Indigenous communities, driving inequality by plundering the wealth of Global South countries to make their shareholders richer, or fuelling unprecedented global heating, the fossil fuel industry is responsible for extreme levels of destruction and harm to people and the planet we live on. And they show no signs of changing. Fossil fuel companies exist to make a profit for their shareholders, and that profit is existentially tied to the continued extraction and burning of fossil fuels, no matter the consequences.

To take the climate impacts of the fossil fuel industry alone: none of the fossil fuel giants have pledged to stop exploring for new oil and gas, even though there is widespread consensus among scientists that

there can be no new fossil fuel projects for us to have a chance of keeping global warming below 1.5 degrees. In fact, many fossil fuel companies are **expanding** their oil and gas production. Research from Uplift [shows](#) that 92% of fossil fuel companies operating in the North Sea plan to invest nothing in renewables between now and 2030.

On top of this, it's also important to remember that the harmful impacts of these companies extend far beyond their role in the climate crisis. The industry is responsible for a whole swathe of violations against people worldwide, in particular through their impacts on Indigenous, Global South, and working class communities. From [BP's gas extraction projects in West Papua](#), where they work with Indonesian occupying forces denying Indigenous Papuans their right to self-determination; to the violent [displacement of communities by Glencore in Colombia](#); to [Shell's gas flaring in the Niger Delta](#) which causes severe heart and respiratory illnesses in local people: it's clear that profit for these companies comes at the cost of safety, dignity, and human rights for communities across the world.

GREENWASH AND FALSE SOLUTIONS: WHY HAVING A RENEWABLES DEPARTMENT IS NOT ENOUGH!

A favoured argument of university management is that fossil fuel companies have a role to play in the energy transition. Their logic goes that, because some fossil fuel companies have renewable energy departments or sell some products they claim to be "low carbon," we need to see them as part of the solution to the climate crisis, rather than as its primary driver. This is not true.

Many major fossil fuel companies do indeed have renewables departments. However, these usually only make up a tiny fraction of their business model - yet companies often use their renewable energy departments to obscure, excuse, or "greenwash" the immensely harmful operations of their continued fossil fuel extraction - which usually still makes up the vast majority of their business model. Even the products that they claim to be "low carbon" [are still often gas](#), which is a fossil fuel!

To take one example, in 2021, Shell invested [only 1.5%](#) of its capital expenditure into renewable energy - meaning an overwhelming majority of its expenditure was still going into fossil fuels. Yet they spend millions annually on convincing the public that they are a key part of the energy transition. ClientEarth [estimates](#) that Shell spent around \$55 million on climate-related advertising in 2018, and InfluenceMap research [shows](#) that around 60% of adverts by the five largest fossil fuel companies contain at least one "green" claim. Yet none of their expenditure on green solutions comes anywhere close to this.

To the untrained eye, the fossil fuel industry is marketed to look like a collection of wind turbine companies with a small oil or gas operation attached, but we know this isn't true: the vast majority of fossil fuel majors' expenditure is still going on fossil fuel extraction. When our universities claim that these companies are part of the energy transition, they are buying into false advertising and propping up the industry's greenwash.

Many fossil fuel companies will cite their Net Zero commitments as reasons why they are part of the solution to the climate crisis. Yet what the likes of Shell and BP fail to highlight is that many of them are [rolling back](#) on their Net Zero commitments in favour of continued fossil fuel expansion. These commitments were already weak - none of the major oil and gas companies have Net Zero policies that are credibly in line with limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees - but now they are being weakened even further in the name of continued profiteering. Having a Net Zero policy does not mean that the policy is credible, meaningful, or actually being acted upon.

WHY NOT TRY TO CHANGE THE MINDS OF THESE COMPANIES?

No amount of well-meaning graduates going into jobs within the fossil fuel industry would have the power to make meaningful change happen in the time necessary to avert catastrophic climate breakdown. We need urgent action if we are to prevent the worst impacts of the climate emergency from becoming a reality, yet it would take today's graduates many years before they get to a position of any decision-making responsibility in a large fossil fuel company like BP or Shell - if they ever get there at all.

Moreover, even the most well-intentioned decision-maker at a major fossil fuel company will have an extreme uphill struggle to try and change the company from the inside. In a capitalist system, corporations' survival is tied to their ability to keep growing and making profits for their shareholders. For fossil fuel companies, this ability to profit is existentially tied to their ability to continue extracting and burning fossil fuels.

Take the mining giant Glencore as an example. In 2024, the company considered moving away from its coal mining operations in favour of mining for other minerals. Whilst this would not have absolved Glencore of its complicity in injustice (mineral mining is still linked to a whole swathe of human rights abuses and environmental degradation), it would have represented a noteworthy turn away from the fossil fuel industry. Yet Glencore chose to keep its coal operations, due - in the words of CEO Gary Nagle - to the "huge amounts of cash" that its coal business generates.

It's clear that these companies have no incentive to change their course, and no amount of well-meaning individuals working inside the company will convince them otherwise. Moral arguments do not stand a chance in the face of such massive financial interests. If we want to change these companies, we need sustained material pressure - and this can start on our campuses.

FURTHER READING

- Oil Change International - [Big Oil Reality Check: Aligned in Failure \(2024\)](#)
- Influence Map - [Big Oil's Real Agenda on Climate Change \(2022\)](#)
- ClientEarth - [The Greenwashing Files](#)
- Uplift - [Oil and gas turns its back on the UK transition \(2024\)](#)