

My name is Disa Sauter, I am part of Scientists for Future, a group of academics who are concerned about the climate and ecological crises. I am very concerned, and I think that each and everyone of you are too. The question we are grappling with in the midst of this concern is how to act in order to make things better.

Specifically, we face a decision about whether to, as a university, cut ties with the fossil fuel industry. Is it justifiable to accept funding from the fossil fuel industry if the money is, for example, used to investigate renewable energy? The argument is often made that we need the fossil fuel industry for the energy transition. I believe that research on renewable energy is very important and that good public-private partnerships can be helpful, sometimes even essential, for pursuing an important higher-order goal. The concern I want to focus on today is whether the fossil fuel industry is a good partner for the higher-order goal of pursuing the energy transition away from fossil fuels. This goal is an integral part of the UvA's stated commitment to accelerating sustainable change in society.

The fossil fuel industry is a major obstacle to the energy transition. This is a fact that is now so well established that it was stated in the 6th Assessment Report of the IPCC. The fossil fuel industry has used and still uses a multitude of strategies to interrupt and delay the energy transition.

1. One is their continuation to not only extract fossil fuels from existing sites but to continue to explore and develop new sites for oil and gas production. This clearly shows their intention to continue to profit off fossil fuel for as long as possible which is to say longer than is compatible with anything less than disastrous environmental effects. These are not value judgments, these are facts established by the IPCC and International Energy Agency. Of course, this is not the picture the fossil fuel industry wants us to have of them: More than 60% of fossil fuel ads include claims about how the companies were helping fight climate change. But according to Follow the Money, only 3% of their investments go to renewable energy.

2. A second way that the fossil fuel industry tries to hinder the energy transition is by lobbying at the local, regional, national and international levels. According to InfluenceMap, fossil fuel companies spend over several hundred million euro a year on lobbying designed to control, delay or block climate policy.

3. Thirdly, the fossil fuel industry has sought to systematically undermine climate science for decades by pushing the false narrative that there was no consensus, even though their own research was clear already in the 1970s about the trajectory we are on. The success of this strategy lost us precious time, during which we should have made progress on the energy transition; instead, we were forced to debate whether climate change was first real at all, and then whether it was caused by human activity. This is diametrically opposed to the UvA goal of accelerating change.

This brings me to my final point, because there is one more challenge to collaborating with the fossil fuel industry: ourselves. We certainly cannot trust the fossil fuel industry to be working for the transition away from fossil fuel, but what's worse, we can barely trust ourselves. Recent evidence has showed empirically that research funded by the the fossil fuel industry tends to more often come to conclusions that are favourable to fossil fuels. Now let me be clear that I do not doubt the integrity of the researchers whose studies were included in that analyses. But as a psychologist I know that human cognition is filled with self-serving biases that can lead us astray, away from what's true and right. That's why we need to make a principled decision, just like we have in the context of funding from the tobacco industry or arms dealers.

Universities around the world are cutting ties with the fossil fuel industry and in recent years Dutch institutions like Naturalis and the van Gogh museum are showing that that the Netherlands is ready to take the step too. Right now, the UvA has an opportunity to take a lead in Dutch higher education: Let's show what courageous leadership looks like in accelerating sustainable change in society.

Thank you for your attention.