

UvA-wide dialogue on collaboration with third parties

Notes Table discussion “UvA values”, 15 May 2023, Science Park

Central Question

UvA values serve as a compass for all UvA activities.

What do the UvA values mean for collaborating with the fossil fuel industry?

UvA Core Values:

The UvA conducts science that seeks to understand and serve the world, without being bound by political, religious, or other constraints. We are an ambitious and creative public university in Amsterdam. We are both independent and engaged. We strive for a sustainable, prosperous future and champion justice and equal opportunities. We listen and give people the freedom to ask questions, to show curiosity and to debate. We do this with respect for the contribution, background and beliefs of each and every individual, and in an environment which is socially and intellectually safe. We will defend these values at all times.

UvA Strategic Plan 2021-2026

Discussion

Although most values were discussed, the core of the discussion centered around three sentences (the first three of the list of six below)

1. (We) serve the world, without being bound by political, religious, or other constraints.
2. We strive for a sustainable, prosperous future and champion justice and equal opportunities.
3. We are both independent and engaged.
4. [We are an ambitious and creative public university in Amsterdam.]
5. [ask questions in a safe environment]
6. [We do this with respect for the contribution, background and beliefs of each and every individual, and in an environment which is socially and intellectually safe]

(ad 1) (We) serve the world, without being bound by political, religious, or other constraints.

Most participants feel strongly for “serving the world”, where many participants emphasize that this includes the global perspective “the whole world”; what we accept/desire/aim for us, also applies to others .

(1) The phrase of *without being bound by ...constraints* raises discussion:

- (a) “without constraints” seems to imply academic freedom, but academic freedom goes hand in hand with responsibility which forms constraints.

All agree that “Anything goes” is not desired – constraints are needed.

→ DEFINITION OF CONSTRAINTS and IMPLEMENTATION OF CONSTRAINTS

In addition: freedom not only means freedom for academics but for all people (freedom is only freedom of nobody is suppressed elsewhere).

- (b) There are always constraints, and it is important to be clear about it. As scientists we are used to spelling out constraints on any project (in research project - time, budget, questions, theory...). For collaboration with any external partner these constraints need to be clearly defined → there are contracts in place, but many do not know what is in those contracts request for transparency.
- constraints should neither be too strict nor centrally forced top-down (as each faculty deals with their own issues); but at the same time should not end up on shoulders of individuals

- constraints go hand in hand with RESPONSIBILITY and ACCOUNTABILITY necessary at every level but defined realistically:

When working with the fossil industry, the individual researcher cannot be deemed responsible to judge all companies to work with. One researcher does not have the complete overview. We should not want to put too much burden on individual researchers.

In case of doubt, decision should be based on what is good for society. Who to judge?

Some think we should trust researchers and academic institutions: as experts they can best judge whether research is to the benefit of the energy transition - this is also their academic freedom (given to them by law)

- (c) Different type of constraints: UvA community wants to work on solving the climate crises, we need to be clear on our own constraints : What can we do? What should we do? What is the timeline?

(2) Without being bound by political constraints”

- (a) We need to be critical and not fool ourselves: Everything we do is political including not doing anything. We seek for facts and knowledge, but these are not neutral, but are also political and have political implications. Careful reflection of the political implication of (non)acting is needed. This point was raised at all three tables.

Deciding for or against working with the fossil fuel industry –either decision will be political given the discussion in society. So, this would conflict the current wording of the UvA values. Some claim: (Climate) Politics should not constrain academics, as they need to be independent, striving for sustainability.

- (b) To ban or not ban collaboration with fossil fuel industry should be both science and politically based.

BUT: at the same time, it is an illusion to think that we can act “clean” when we are embedded in the current system that includes maximizing profit for companies. We also have to deal with this reality.

(3) The term “serve the world” raises the question of what *does* serve the world.

- (a) Overall, the thought is that working with the fossil fuel industry, is not serving the world, as this would harm the world. However, there were some voices stating that the fossil fuel industry needs to be included in order to change the system; “fossil fuel industry does not change by itself”.
- (b) Different values are relevant when it comes to how we want to serve the world. When it comes to climate change, values are potentially very different if we want to operate for energy transition, compared to operate for social/physical safety.

(4) Discussion of “impartiality”

- (a) What is impartiality? When is it reached? Is it even possible? Should the UvA not underline that impartiality is not possible, but make the considerations as transparent as possible? There is currently a lack of democratization and transparency in these processes.

(ad 2) We strive for a sustainable, prosperous future and champion justice and equal opportunities.

- (1) Sustainable world: we all agree that we need to transform into a sustainable future; we accept the scientific findings (IPCC report) as current status.

SUSTAINABLE FUTURE should be high on our agenda given the current situation.

- (a) We do not know yet HOW to transform into a fossil free future : we need to keep options and explore them (what is right we will only know afterwards; things we considered

solutions previously have been proven wrong. So here as well: we need to learn from the past; allow mistakes but correct them)

(b) We need a principled decision:

YES, we work with the fossil industry to realize sustainable future, BUT need to formulate constraints

NO, we do not work with the fossil industry, UNLESS certain criteria (to be defined) are met.

(c) We need a principled decision:

Do we want to set an example?

We operate within existing law. We are not law makers, but we do have the role to influence law makers

(d) Collaborating with the fossil fuel industry brings a risk of unconscious bias

Any industry funded research is influenced by the industry. The question is to what extent and how can this be monitored? This is however dependent on direct or indirect funding.

(2) The phrases “justice” & “equal opportunities” raise discussion

(a) Justice and equal opportunities do not only hold at local level but also global level.

Fossil companies do not act just (justice is incompatible with companies that violate human rights) and need to be protected. Who defines what just is? How can we implement this?

Some companies have a proven track-record of not acting just (violating the law): We could establish criteria that partners who are convicted by law are banned from collaboration (e.g., Shell is convicted for not doing enough to serve the Paris Agreement & for violating human rights, plus has proven to be going against science).

(b) Beware: Where do our “resources” come from? Origin of the money that is spent at the university for research can come from sources that do not act JUST and can be earned by harming people (“blood money”).

(3) “Future” raises discussion

The concept of future and future generations is underdeveloped in the current value statement and needs more emphasize

(ad 3) We are both independent and engaged.

(1) Independent and engaged almost seem contradictory: there is tension between these words, especially in relation to the fossil industry.

(2) We are academically independent

free thinking, not being influenced (as far as possible, since research has shown that influence is more common than acknowledged)

to safeguard academic independence, there are check and balances in place (see below)

(3) We want to be engaged in societal questions

(a) The UvA has an exemplary role in society

(b) Researchers must stop thinking that they can save the world (stop doing research that YOU think is good for others); stop overestimating yourself!

(4) With regard to working with the fossil fuel industry: Collaborating brings a risk of greenwashing. – ‘Are the research results meant for energy transition or for marketing purposes?’

(ad 4) We are an ambitious and creative public university in Amsterdam.

- We are ambitious and creative – we do not need fossil industry can work on energy transition ourselves

- We are a public university: play a public role (see above)

(ad 5) Ask questions in a safe environment

- We need to be allowed to ask new (unconstraint) questions
- We have the freedom to ask question, but we need to get to INFORMED questions, this is a pre-requisite for decision making (→ responsibility of education, e.g., lessons on energy transition for students in all faculties)

(ad 6) We do this with respect for the contribution, background and beliefs of each and every individual, and in an environment which is socially and intellectually safe.

- We should trust academia in being critical on collaboration and making the right decisions
- If we work with fossil fuel industry, we should improve on transparency and monitoring

Other insights / suggestions

- Education is altogether absent from the value statement
- Can the fossil fuel industry help with energy transition?
- A division should be made between projects and companies: don't evaluate the company, but evaluate each single project
- open question hour to the board "ask the board anything" on working with fossil industry
- lessons on the energy crisis for ALL students across the UvA

Key take away:

What we need is

- Translation of the UvA values into actionable rules ("The value statement is relatively easy to agree to, the *how* is the challenging part")
- Defined constraints & a good framework of responsibility & accountability at all university levels (from individual researcher, research group, department, faculty, university)
Do we need more than the current NWO/VSNU rules? → translation to working with third parties/fossil fuel
- Guidelines for collaboration: data use, publishing, etc.
explicit rules of conduct in working with third parties, including ban on patent shelving, misuse of results etc.
- An independent committee to judge, expressing strong advice, and safeguard rules.
- Transparency of the advice of ethics committee, the final reached decision, possibly contracts
- Possibly an (appropriate) check of all collaboration projects is desired (comparable to human research that needs to be assessed by ethics committee), but this should not lead to overregulation (balance: more administrative paperwork vs. individual responsibility)