

# Advice on collaboration with the fossil fuel industry

July, 2024

Prepared by the Climate Action Programme, Delft Energy Initiative, and Integrity Office (see Appendix V).

Like many other universities, TU Delft regularly collaborates with fossil fuel companies. These collaborations can be in research, but also in teaching and other student activities. Scientific insights into climate change and the urgent need for an energy transition - from fossil to renewable energy sources - have shone a critical light on fossil fuel companies. In academia and beyond, people are now asking whether universities should still collaborate with the fossil fuel industry, and if so, under what conditions? This document outlines the process through which TU Delft sought to find answers to this question and provides recommendations on collaboration with the fossil fuel industry.

In this document, we use the following definition of the fossil fuel industry: Companies whose business model is largely based on the extraction, processing and/or sale of fossil fuels such as oil, coal, and gas.

## Process

The recommendations are based on results of three TU Delft initiatives that took place between November 2023 and March 2024. The initiatives gave the entire TU Delft community an opportunity to share their thoughts on the subject. A detailed description of the three initiatives, including insights, can be found in the individual reports (Appendices I, II, III).

The three initiatives were:

- Online consultation
  - Objective: Providing insight into the issue to participants, learning about the TU Delft community's views on the issue
  - Format: Online consultation asking participants to rate statements and possible measures facilitated by Populytics<sup>1</sup>
  - Participants: ~3,000 students and staff
- Open dialogues
  - Objective: Dialogue between members of the TU community with different perspectives
  - Form: Roundtables with mixed groups of students and staff following the World Cafe method
  - Participants: ~130 students and staff
- Moral Deliberation
  - Objective: Collecting arguments for concrete situations, identifying guiding principles for policy

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<sup>1</sup> <https://populytics.nl/en/>

- Form: Assessment of five representative examples of collaborative research using the Moral Deliberation method<sup>2</sup>, guided by Governance & Integrity<sup>3</sup>
- Participants: Selected group of 12 students and staff

## Context of the recommendations

Universities have been hailed as sanctuaries of ideas, where scientists can produce objective, reliable knowledge unrestricted by political and social interests, allowing science to fulfil its democratic task.

In practice, however, science and society are more closely intertwined, and the relationship between them is not one-way. Academia does not only produce knowledge for society, but there is a flourishing exchange of ideas. Many scientists conduct research on important social issues, for a great part in consortiums with civil society partners. They actively engage in the public debate or combine their research with activism. TU Delft has a campus in The Hague to encourage knowledge exchange with politicians and policymakers. Societal engagement is an intrinsic part of the university.

As Peter-Paul Verbeek, rector of the University of Amsterdam, explained in the 2023 KNAW Academy Lecture: "On the one hand, science [...] is *value-free*, as a neutral and independent source of knowledge and insight that society can rely on. On the other hand, science is *valuable*. It is both neutral and impactful and both independent and engaged." Verbeek dubs this the 'science paradox'. "It is up to universities to hold together the two poles of this paradox."

Collaboration with the fossil fuel industry is an example of the science paradox:

- Collaboration can help make science *valuable* if it contributes to TU Delft's mission: impact for a sustainable society (Mission, Strategic Agenda 2024-2030). "TU Delft contributes to solving complex and urgent societal challenges through the education of highly qualified engineers who are creative, innovative and responsible, by pushing the boundaries of technical sciences, by developing innovative applications, and by fostering entrepreneurship." (Vision, Strategic Agenda 2024-2030).
- At the same time, collaboration may jeopardise the *value-free* quality of science: close ties with industry may come at the expense of the independence. A literature review by De Jonge Akademie has shown that external funders have become increasingly influential in scientific research, and there are concerns that government and industry priorities chart the course for research in certain fields ([Thinking Space, DJA 2023](#)).

As a university community, we must constantly gauge how to hold together the two poles of this paradox. It is fitting for the university and its community to independently arrive at a critical assessment of moral dilemmas produced by these two contradictory poles, which will require us to be open to arguments that are not aligned with our views. In Verbeek's words: "doubt requires courage".

The recommendations of this advisory report should therefore not be taken as a conclusive answer to the question if it is desirable to continue collaborating with the fossil fuel industry (and if so, under

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<sup>2</sup> Moral deliberation is a form of empirical ethics. Moral inquiries performed by a group of trained professionals will produce an ethically sound moral judgement. Every moral judgment contains decisive arguments, principles, which justify the decision, arguments that support the alternative and measures that reduce or make up for the harm of the decision.

<sup>3</sup> <https://gi-nederland.com/>

what conditions?). Instead, they outline a process in which the university and its community can form an opinion on such partnerships. We start from the current situation and find the best solution for the here and now. Change can be rapid. The proposed measures will therefore have to be evaluated and, if necessary, adjusted.

The first recommendation is to be transparent about collaboration with industry, as it is a key prerequisite for further dialogue. Second, we recommend cherishing and strengthening TU Delft's culture of openness. This also ties in to the third recommendation: establishing an evaluation framework for collaboration with the fossil fuel industry to help staff and students form an opinion. The fourth and final recommendation is to look beyond the existing relationships between university, society, and industry, and to reflect on TU Delft's role in the transition to a fairer and more sustainable energy system as a community.

## Recommendation 1: Be transparent about collaboration

### Conclusion per initiative

#### Online consultation:

80% of participants said they were in favour of full openness on collaboration between TU Delft and the fossil industry. This measure received the most votes of all proposed measures.

#### Dialogues:

Many participants hailed the need for transparency in response to the last question asked at each dialogue session: 'what do we need going forward?' Transparency is desirable for both external purposes (see recent public disclosure requests) and internal discussion (see Recommendation 2). Only if we know more about current partnerships and the underlying rationale for them can we form an informed opinion.

#### Moral deliberation:

The moral deliberation chamber viewed transparency about all partnerships as self-evident. This was explicitly stated several times in the discussion on damage control.

### Overall conclusion

All three initiatives revealed a strong desire within TU Delft for full openness about collaboration and partnerships, including the underlying motivation.

### Actions

	Action owner(s)
<p>Current status:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Establishing a definition: what do we mean by collaboration with the fossil fuel industry? Which partnerships fall under transparency rules and should be subject to a review process? (paid/unpaid, teaching/research, duration, exploratory/executive, ancillary activities, attendance at student activities...)</li> <li>- Identifying all existing partnerships between TU Delft and the fossil fuel industry</li> <li>- Publishing an overview of all partnerships (internally and externally)</li> </ul> <p>Future collaboration:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Develop a policy proposal on how to continue achieving transparency in the future (inspired by agreements on ancillary activities (online module?), with consideration of privacy protection and individual safety)</li> <li>- Based on that policy: keep the overview up to date, including:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• explaining how research contributes to the energy transition and/or other transitions, and</li> <li>• explaining how fossil partners contribute financially and substantively</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>Core team</p> <p>Core team</p> <p>Communications</p> <p>Core team</p> <p>Core team with help from Finance/I&amp;IC/researchers</p>

## Recommendation 2: Cherish and strengthen a culture of open dialogue

### Conclusion per initiative

#### Online consultation:

88% of respondents felt that staff and students should be consulted more often on issues on which the Executive Board makes decisions.

#### Dialogues:

Many participants valued the dialogue sessions, hailing the pleasant, safe atmosphere and the chance to interact with people with different perspectives. However, many did point out that the sessions were too short and that they needed more dialogue on the subject, not only to bring together people with different views, but also to give staff and students the opportunity to learn about the energy transition. To have a good conversation, after all, one must understand the challenges in the various sub-areas in which TU Delft operates. Direct conversations with colleagues can play a special and valuable role in this regard, providing factual information and offering insight into dilemmas they might face.

#### Moral deliberation chamber:

The moral deliberation chamber consisted of members of the TU Delft community from different groups and faculties, and with different opinions on working with the fossil fuel industry. The meetings took place in an open atmosphere and showed that it is possible to have constructive, substantive conversations in such a setting.

Case owners put themselves in a vulnerable position by answering questions about partnerships. All had entered into partnerships with the best scientific and societal intentions, while the moral deliberation chamber was tasked with asking (critical) questions. At times, this was painful for the case holders to experience. On the other hand, the evaluation of the moral deliberation also shows that its members found it difficult to express doubts or counterarguments to case owners, especially when they had a professional relationship. They feared that it could harm future collaboration. This shows that there is still work to be done in creating a culture in which people feel safe to question each other's choices and have an open conversation about them.

### Overall conclusion

It is neither possible nor desirable to design an assessment framework that provides a conclusive answer to all matters of collaboration. In keeping with the autonomy of researchers and faculties, it is essential that they form their own opinion on every collaboration. This requires a culture in which colleagues have the courage to talk to and challenge each other and to deal with doubt constructively. Work is yet to be done in this regard, as is reflected by the need for further dialogue between students and staff. The recent findings of the Education Inspectorate on social safety also confirm that TU Delft would do well to further invest in an open dialogue culture. The three initiatives have shown that they are helpful tools in this regard, and it is recommended that such methods be repeated in the future.

## Actions

	Action owner(s)
Continuing dialogue on collaboration, strengthening mutual understanding, possibly with special sessions on the assessment frameworks or on specific themes, such as academic freedom	Core team + experts from the organisation
Roll out moral deliberation more broadly across the university, including the executive board, deans, and directors	Integrity Office

## Recommendation 3: Set conditions for collaboration

### Conclusion per initiative

#### Online consultation:

A striking result of the online consultation is that participants are strongly divided on the statement “Partnerships with the fossil industry will accelerate the transition to a sustainable energy system”. In terms of measures, some of the participants preferred to refrain from new partnerships in the near future (20%) or ending current collaboration (9%). Many participants opted for a measure that imposes conditions on potential partnerships:

- “We will only initiate research in collaboration with the fossil industry if an assessment committee determines that the research is aimed at developing knowledge to accelerate the energy transition, phase out fossil fuels as quickly as possible, and/or avoid further CO2 emissions.” (58% of participants)
- “We only collaborate with companies from the fossil industry if they have a credible plan to meet the Climate Goals of the Paris Agreement.” (54% of participants)

76% of participants recommended at least one of these two measures and 38% chose both.

#### Dialogues:

The purpose of the open dialogues was not to debate the topic or to develop a concrete action plan for the follow-up. Nevertheless, several participants suggested imposing conditions on or otherwise restricting collaborations.

#### Moral deliberation:

Of the five cases, two received a positive advice (continue/enter into partnership) and three received a negative advice (discontinue/not enter into partnership). With exception of one case, the advice was not issued unanimously; on average, one-fifth of the participants favoured the minority position. Based on these figures, there is no clear majority support for ceasing all collaboration with the fossil fuel industry.

The fact that for projects with the same partner two negative and one positive advice was issued, shows that the result of the review process is highly dependent on context. After all, the moral deliberation chamber’s advice is always achieved by weighing arguments of principle. Company policy can carry different weight in different contexts. Therefore, that choice is best made at the project level.

The university may also decide to block certain companies entirely. In one case, for example, the chamber issued a negative advice because the company in question did not commit to the Paris Agreement and was also complicit in human rights abuses.

It is important to note that the moral deliberation chamber was expressly set up to assess specific projects as case studies, where multiple cases could involve the same partner. It was therefore

beyond the scope of the deliberative chamber to examine whether project-level or partner-level assessment were preferable.

### Overall conclusion

The three initiatives reveal different views on whether partnerships with the fossil fuel industry can help accelerate the energy transition. There is no broad-based support for avoiding new partnerships in the near future or to cease current collaboration. Some partners may, however, be blocked (introducing a blacklist).

Partnerships must be evaluated in order to test whether and under what conditions they are considered justified. This involves evaluating both the partner and the specific project in question. Recommendations 3a and 3b, respectively, lay the groundwork for these two evaluations. Once established, the frameworks should be reviewed regularly, due to developments in the world and new insights. It is prudent to assess both new and existing structural<sup>4</sup> partnerships with the evaluation framework to be developed.

### Recommendation 3a: Develop a method to assess partners

#### Conclusion per initiative

##### Online consultation:

While participants were not asked about a partner evaluation process, they did mention conditions that partners should meet, in the free space of the consultation, such as concrete information about sustainability plans or minimum investments in the energy transition out of the partner's profit or R&D budget.

##### Dialogues:

The purpose of the open dialogues was not to debate the topic or to develop a concrete action plan for the follow-up. Nevertheless, several participants suggested imposing conditions on partners.

##### Moral deliberation:

Moral deliberation was hampered by the lack or ambiguity of information on the sustainability ambitions of current and potential partners. It is therefore necessary to establish science-based *due diligence* criteria and to require each partner to be transparent regarding these criteria.

#### Overall conclusion

The university needs a process to review partners and their sustainability ambitions so that this information can be used to 1) determine whether a partner will be blocked and 2) assess a specific project (if the partner is not blocked); see 3b.

It is recommended that the criteria for this be drafted broadly enough to apply to all partners (including those outside the fossil fuel industry).

Inspiration can be drawn from existing benchmarking methods, used among others in the financial sector to determine whether a company is demonstrably committed to the Paris Agreement and/or complies with European *Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence (CSDD)* regulations<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> In this case, 'structural partnerships' means partnerships without an end date or frequently recurring partnerships.

<sup>5</sup> [https://commission.europa.eu/business-economy-euro/doing-business-eu/corporate-sustainability-due-diligence\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/business-economy-euro/doing-business-eu/corporate-sustainability-due-diligence_en)

CSDD regulations are primarily about quantitative insight into sustainability ambitions and practices, but other morally relevant criteria should also be included (e.g. protecting human rights). The advice is to avoid collaborating with partners who do not offer sufficient transparency to assess them.

### Actions

	Action owner(s)
Examine methods to determine whether a company is demonstrably committed to the Paris Agreement and/or CSDD. Inspiration: Science Based Target Initiative <sup>6</sup>	Core team
Identify which evaluation frameworks are already being used within TU Delft (e.g. at CiTG, Geoscience & Engineering)	Core team
Explore the feasibility/expediency of establishing national review criteria for a blacklist of partners. Inspiration: UNL, other universities (in the Netherlands and abroad)	SD? I&IC? Core team?
Perform transparency check on current partners	TBD
Create implementation plan (including partner files, to be updated with each new case, assign monitor, periodically review blacklist)	Core team/I&IC

### Recommendation 3b: Design a process to assess projects

#### Conclusion per initiative

##### Online consultation:

58% of participants favour collaborating with partners only if a review committee finds that the research contributes to the energy transition. The main reason cited was that this ensures that the projects accelerate the energy transition. Concerns were also raised (albeit to a lesser extent) about the amount of extra work this creates and the restriction on academic freedom.

##### Dialogues:

The purpose of the open dialogues was not to debate the topic or to develop a concrete action plan for the follow-up. Nevertheless, several participants suggested imposing conditions on or otherwise restricting collaborations.

##### Moral deliberation:

The moral deliberation sessions produced several basic moral principles that should serve as the basis for an evaluation framework to assess partnerships. Specifically, the university should consider what principles will be violated if a partnership does or does not go ahead on a case-by-case basis.

##### The principles are as follows<sup>7</sup>:

- Core university principles: the human right to science, academic freedom, the right to academic education, and the university's mission (subtitle of Strategic Agenda 2024-2030: Impact for a sustainable society)
- Guiding and limiting principles for collaboration: an equitable climate transition (e.g. the right to a dignified life for future generations and non-human life, the right to a fair distribution of climate burdens), social justice (fundamental human rights), and reliable and

<sup>6</sup> <https://sciencebasedtargets.org/>

<sup>7</sup> see the Moral Deliberation Report for further information



independent science and education (citizens' right to reliable climate change science, university autonomy)

- Conditional principles for collaboration: reliable and independent science, due diligence, and impact analysis

In all cases, avoiding complicity in violating principles was mentioned as a key factor in deciding whether or not to enter into a partnership. The most cited principles included climate justice (harmful business model; insufficiently convincing climate plans) and social justice (human rights violations).

Moral deliberation is needed to assess the principles on a case-by-case basis. The moral deliberation chamber should therefore be given permanent status. At the same time, it is also important to integrate decision-making about partnerships with scientific work. This does justice to academic freedom and responsibility.

### Overall conclusion

There is a need for an evaluation framework for entering into new partnerships and reviewing existing structural partnerships. This can be designed based on the basic principles that follow from the moral deliberation. Inspiration will also be drawn from other Dutch and foreign universities (see Appendix IV for an overview of current policies adopted by other Dutch universities).

To strike a good balance between workload and efficiency on the one hand and the diligent review of new partnerships on the other, the advice is to set up a hybrid process, in which researchers and students assess whether a partnership complies with conditions. In complex cases, they submit the case to a standing committee, which evaluates it according to the moral deliberation chamber model. There will be a decision tree to help determine whether a collaboration is complex. To ensure consistency, an archive will need to be created so that similar cases can be accessed.

### Actions

	Action owner(s)
Designing a process to assess collaboration with fossil fuel industry partners, based on principles identified in the moral deliberation process.	I&IC? Legal? Core team?
Setting up a central moral deliberation chamber to review complex cases	Integrity Office
Creating and maintaining a central archive for complex cases	Integrity Office
Publishing the review process online	Communications
Evaluating the review process, evaluation framework and moral principles at regular intervals	Core team

## Recommendation 4: Define TU Delft's role in the energy transition

### Conclusion per initiative

#### Online consultation:

94% of participants think TU Delft has an important role to play in the energy transition.

#### Dialogues:

During the dialogues, many participants remarked that TU Delft should play an active/more active role in the public debate on the energy transition and other social issues, that TU Delft could serve as a moral compass for others, and that TU Delft is in a position to influence the fossil fuel industry.

#### Moral deliberation chamber:

In moral deliberations, partnerships are assessed on a case-by-case basis. The risk of this case-based approach is that it does not look at systemic injustices embedded in the hydrocarbon economy. It was beyond the scope of the moral deliberation chamber to go more in depth, but members did point out the need to discuss this topic in a different context. If TU Delft wishes to contribute to achieving an equitable (energy) system in the longer term - and to do so faster than by making project-level decisions - it will have to make room for this.

Many students will go to work in the energy sector after graduating. It is important to train engineers who are also able to question "the system".

### Overall conclusion

Contributing to the energy transition goes beyond developing technology. By carefully and critically picking partnerships, TU Delft, and other universities like it, can influence which businesses will play a role in the economy of the future, including in the energy industry. TU Delft has a responsibility towards society in this regard, and it is therefore recommended that TU Delft considers its role in the energy transition in a broader context. What are TU Delft's ambitions and what is its responsibility? This touches on themes such as dependence on fossil industry companies, urging partners to pursue greater sustainability ambitions, and working with other universities, knowledge institutions, and government organisations to design and bring about change together. The advice is also to pay ample attention to the ethics of climate change in education.

### Actions

	Action owner(s)
Mapping climate/climate ethics in teaching and inventorying demand. Update or extend teaching offerings as needed.	Core team, education department, education directors
Creating a long-term vision for TU Delft's role in the energy transition (including the role that collaboration can play in this regard).	Core team with help from SD
Formulating and implementing actions based on the long-term vision	SD? Communication? Public Affairs?

## In conclusion- three important notes

Many of the actions in this advice have been assigned to a core team. This team does not currently exist. Additional dedicated human resources are needed to properly implement all actions. A good fit would be a structure as set up for knowledge security, with a centrally coordinated team and contacts within the faculties.

Various organisational units are linked to the actions. While we have not yet approached them, their involvement in the action in question seems logical to us.

The scope of this report is restricted to collaboration with the fossil fuel industry, but the dilemmas discussed apply equally well to other third-party collaborations. This includes, for example, collaboration with the chemical industry, defence, or parties that themselves work closely with the fossil fuel industry.

Appendix I, II, III- reports on the various initiatives.

These reports are attached as separate documents.

Appendix IV: Dutch universities' partnership policy (May 2024)

Institute	Policy status	Partner criteria	Project criteria	Evaluation framework?	www
EUR	In development	Has mapped whether current partners have positive or negative impact on climate	-	-	<a href="#">link</a>
MU	Public	No longer supports working with partners who oppose the transition, but open to collaboration with parties who are still part of the fossil system but actively working on the transition	-	-	<a href="#">link</a>
RUG	In development	-	-	-	<a href="#">link</a>
RUN	Unknown	-	-	-	-
TU/e	In development	-	-	-	-
UL	Public	No collaboration with fossil industry partners who are not demonstrably committed to meeting the Paris Climate Goals.	-	-	<a href="#">link</a>
UT	Public	The university will only enter into new partnership agreements with fossil companies that demonstrate a substantial change of direction towards enabling the transition from fossil fuels to alternative, sustainable energy sources.	No new research projects that encourage the use of fossil resources	Committee review as per the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD)	<a href="#">link</a>

Institute	Policy status	Partner criteria	Project criteria	Evaluation framework?	www
UU	Public		Expert group that will develop concrete assessment criteria for partnerships with the fossil industry.	Principles of evaluation framework established Review criteria in development	<a href="#">link</a>
UvA	Public	No partnerships with fossil fuel companies unless several strict conditions are met.	Project has the explicit goal of contributing to achieving Paris Agreement targets	Policy framework "Collaboration with Third Parties"	<a href="#">link</a>
UvT	Public	-	Each project is assessed to determine whether it contributes to the energy transition and has truly positive social impact.		<a href="#">link</a>
VU	Public	No new research partnerships with fossil energy companies unless they are demonstrably committed to the Paris Climate Agreement	Guidelines setting criteria for what is and is not a research partnership	Central Committee on Fossil-Free Research	<a href="#">link</a>
WUR	Public	Check on partner in decision-making framework		Public decision-making framework	<a href="#">link</a>

## Appendix V: team and support group

### **Theme team**

Doortje Lenders (Integrity Office)  
Maaïke Damen (Climate Action Programme, Delft Energy)  
Mare Faber (Integrity Office)  
Marie Kummerlowe (Climate Action Programme)

### *In consultation with:*

Climate Action Programme - Herman Russchenberg  
Delft Energy - Peter Palensky  
Integrity Office - Ibo van de Poel

### *In collaboration with:*

- Online consultation: [Populytics](#)
- Open dialogues: Aafke Fraaije (TBM)
- Moral Deliberation Chamber: [Governance & Integrity](#)
- Editorial advice: Anke Dählmann (CiTG)

### **“begeleidingsgroep”** (group that gave input and guidance)

Andrea Ramirez Ramirez  
Behnam Taebi  
Femke Vossepoel  
Hans Suijkerbuijk  
Herman Russchenberg  
Ibo van de Poel  
Riccardo Riva

### **Moral deliberation chamber members**

Alexander de Vet  
Anke Dählmann  
Anne van de Poel  
Eveline Holla  
Helena Schmidt  
Hugo-Pieter Iglesias van Montfort  
Meryem Altiner  
Sander Otte  
Sandra Verhagen  
Sebastian Geiger  
Thomas Arblaster  
Walter Jansen  
Doortje Lenders (secretary)