

Open Dialogues on collaboration with the fossil fuel industry

Report v1.0 - May 2024

Summary

The open dialogues are one of three initiatives implemented on behalf of the Executive Board to sound out the university's opinions on collaboration with the fossil fuel industry. Starting the conversation in small groups using the World Cafe method proved an effective way to discuss this complex topic. The Board's presence and listening attitude were appreciated. Participants did feel that the sessions were too short and would like to have more time to discuss the issues at hand. Furthermore, there is a strong need for transparency and clarity on whether and if so how TU Delft should work with the fossil fuel industry. Two logical follow-up steps in policymaking on this issue are therefore to:

- keep talking to each other, e.g. organising a second series of dialogue sessions.
- be transparent about current partnerships and better document and share the motivation for collaboration.

Context/Introduction

Dutch universities have come under pressure to take up an explicit position on collaboration with the fossil fuel industry. Several universities have already issued statements on the matter and it is a hot-button issue for TU Delft. There has been a deliberation on the topic, but also an occupation by activist students. To meet the need for a constructive conversation, the following three steps were taken between November 2023 and March 2024:

1. A TU Delft-wide survey
2. Open dialogues for TU Delft students and staff
3. A university-wide moral deliberation committee

The central question was: Do collaborations with the fossil fuel industry contribute to accelerating the energy transition? All TU Delft staff and students were invited to share their thoughts. This report describes the experiences and findings of the second step, the open dialogues.

Purpose of open dialogue sessions

The aim of the open dialogues was to give people an opportunity to actively share their views on the topic and to facilitate the meeting of people with different views. During the dialogues, smaller groups delved deeper into the issue by listening to each other's views and experiences. The aim was not for participants to debate each other or to develop a concrete action plan.

Participants' expectations

Prior to the sessions, participants were asked what they expected from the sessions and what they considered the most important question in the context of the university's collaboration with the fossil fuel industry. A summary of the inputs received can be found in Appendix I. Overall, the participants wondered in what way collaboration with the fossil fuel industry is justified and what influence an organisation like TU Delft has on the sustainability policies of the fossil fuel industry. Responses further revealed that participants felt a strong need for more insight into the extent and nature of current cooperation, and especially into the views and drivers of colleagues. Participants particularly wanted to speak to colleagues with differing views.

Based on these expectations, the open dialogues were designed as a series of conversations in smaller groups following the World Cafe¹ model. The conversations revolved around sharing and listening to each other's stories, giving participants a better idea of the different viewpoints and opinions within the university.

World Cafe dialogues

The World Cafe method is a proven model for organising a conversation aimed at sharing a lot of ideas and knowledge through dialogue and collaboration. It helps foster constructive discussions, without focussing on the differences as in a debate. Participants sit at tables in varying configurations, speaking to each other during three 20-minute rounds. They can write their ideas on tablecloths.

In our version of the World Cafe model, participants found several posters on the wall when they entered the space². The posters had been selected to familiarise them with the topic in a creative way and foster conversation.



Figure 1- climate-related posters from "Artist for Climate" in the room

Next, the purpose and format of the session were explained, urging participants to engage in open, respectful conversation with each other. Tim van der Hagen attended each of the three sessions and gave a brief introduction.

Participants sat at tables of 6-8 people. Each table had a host tasked with fostering a relaxed atmosphere and ensuring that everyone was heard, regardless of their ideas and views. Participants were invited to share personal experiences. The host brought attention to similarities between

¹ <https://www.theworldcafe.nl/>

² The works were selected from 'the climate collection' of "[Artists for climate](#)".

participants and was responsible for ensuring that the discussions did not devolve into debates. Each round focused on one question. After 20 minutes, a new round began with a new question building on the previous one. After each round, participants moved to different tables to keep the groups rotating. After the three rounds, everyone wrote their own answer to the last question on a piece of paper, folded it into a paper plane, and flew it to the front of the room.

The questions were formulated in such a way as to elicit, so that participants could learn from each other.

- Round 1: What brings you here?
Goal: to recreate typical conversations about this topic
- Round 2: What have you heard so far that was meaningful to you?
What surprised or challenged you?
Goal: to have everyone share what parts of the previous discussion they deemed most relevant. Linking the small-group discussions to the broader conversation between all participants
- Round 3: How to proceed: What needs our attention first? What are the main challenges?
Objective: What do participants need to move forward? Give guidance to follow-up activities

Session report

During the three sessions, active and constructive conversations unfolded at the various tables, with participants listening to each other's stories with an open mind.

The table hosts found that many participants were curious, while others had clear concerns, both about the impact of collaborating with the fossil fuel industry and ceasing all collaboration. Many people gradually eased into the sessions and enjoyed having their voices heard. The three questions were apt, and while they did not allow participants to delve as deep as they might have hoped, the questions did have the intended effect.

Most people shared the feeling that TU Delft has an important role to play in the energy transition, and that it has a great responsibility. Many participants had a clear idea of the university's role in society, and most therefore felt clearly that *something* had to be done to take that responsibility, although they struggled to verbalise *what*. For example, many agreed that conditions should be imposed on partnerships, but what these should be remained unclear.

The dialogues revealed an information gap regarding partnerships with the fossil fuel industry: people do not know about the projects or the reasons for them. This underlines the importance of transparency in order to engage in dialogue effectively.

Having people who were initially critical of the university's collaboration with the fossil industry speak to people who themselves work with the fossil fuel industry was very effective, as it helped close the information gap. It also made it clear that people with ties to the fossil industry are well aware of the objections, which led greater mutual understanding. Having these different groups meet proved very valuable. Conversations at tables without any people with ties to the fossil fuel industry were often more open and tended to go into ethics/philosophical matters rather than practical issues.

Paper planes

At the end of the third round, participants wrote their own answer to the last question on a plane (What needs our attention first? What are the key challenges)?

These answers can be found in full in Appendix II. The answers generally revealed a need for guidelines, clarity, and transparency. Furthermore, many participants mentioned that the university should take part in the public debate, as well as expressing a need for more dialogue (both internal and external), and involvement in policymaking.

The sessions in figures

A total of 158 people participated in the sessions, 40% of whom were students and 60% staff (43% academic and 16% support staff). Some participants had strong opinions on whether or not to collaborate with the fossil fuel industry, but most did not have a clear position. The presence of colleagues with ties with the fossil industry was very valuable and allowed all participants to broaden their views. Unfortunately, there were relatively few of these colleagues in the first session.

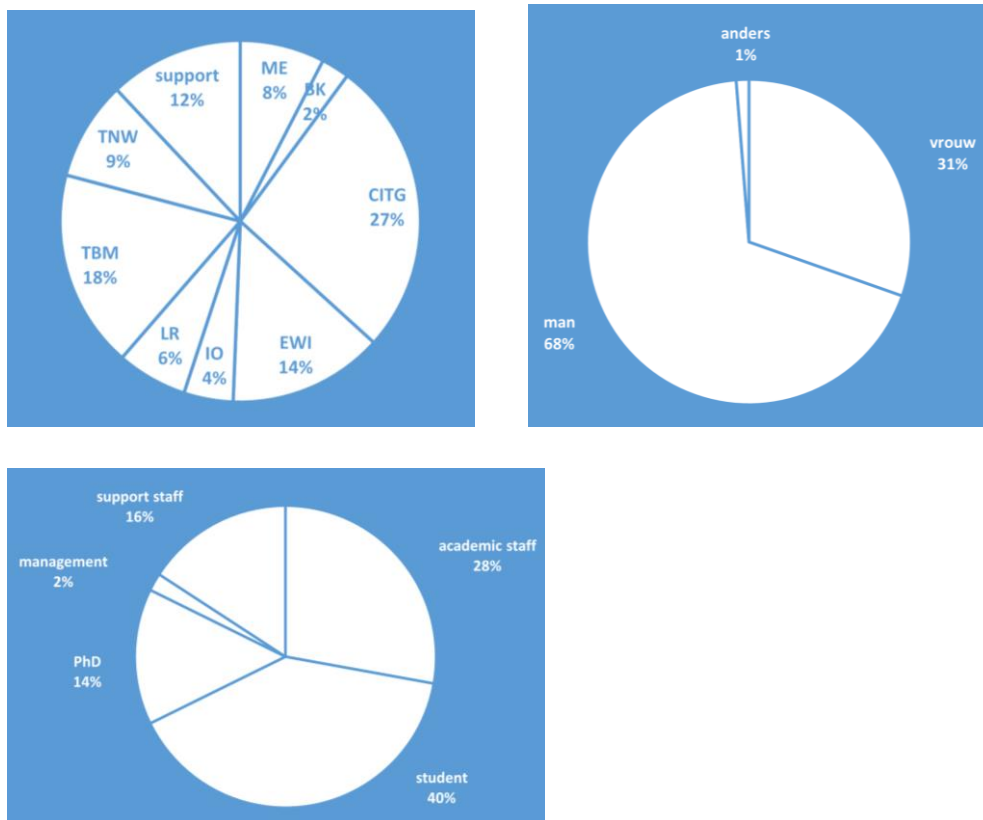


Figure 2 - Overview of participants by (a) faculty, (b) gender, (c) position

Session evaluation

After the third session, participants were asked to evaluate the three sessions. In a nutshell:

- People appreciated the sessions and felt the atmosphere was safe and pleasant
- People felt the sessions were too short
- People spoke to others with different views
- People learned something about what it means to partner up with the fossil industry

Findings and follow-up

Findings

- Dialogue within TU Delft
 - Well-prepared and guided small-group discussions are a suitable way to discuss complex issues. World Cafe is an effective method.
 - The Executive Board's presence and listening attitude were appreciated.

- Partnerships with the fossil industry
 - There is a need for more dialogue and more time to have this conversation with each other
 - There is a strong need for
 - transparency on current collaboration with the fossil industry and the underlying rationale
 - an answer to the question of whether TU Delft should collaborate with the fossil industry
 - (in case TU Delft will keep collaborating with fossil industry) guidelines and/or a review committee
 - Some of the participants feel that:
 - TU Delft should take a more active role in social debates and serve as a moral compass for others.
 - TU Delft has an undeniable influence on the fossil industry, which we should leverage.
 - TU Delft students and staff should learn more about the climate impact of fossil fuel use, as well as the role the industry currently plays/can play in the transition.

Follow-up

The dialogue sessions revealed two clear follow-up steps that could add value to decision-making about collaboration with the fossil fuel industry:

- Keep talking to each other, e.g. by organising a new series of dialogue sessions. Participants found the sessions positive, but too short. They feel the need to delve deeper into this topic. In a new series of dialogues, we could discuss different scenarios or measures, again focusing on how they would impact the participants themselves. This also ensures involvement in policymaking.
- Sharing information on current partnerships, including both the nature of and rationale for these projects. What knowledge does it produce? How does it contribute to the energy transition? This needs to be better documented and shared in the future, due in part to close the information gap.

Appendix I – Vragen van deelnemers vooraf, op hoofdlijnen:

- what's the most effective way to combat climate change?
 - would collaboration help to convince/aid the fossil fuel (FF) industry to downscale fossil fuels and to transition to other resources?
 - do we need the practical knowledge of the ff industry to understand the complex energy transition?
 - would we accidentally prolong the use of fossil fuels?
- how can we remain accountable to ourselves?
 - how can we minimize our own carbon footprint?
 - do our partners have sustainability goals and plans? how can we be sure that our partners are sincere?
 - how can we make collaborations with the ff industry transparent within the university?
 - how can the TU prevent being used for fossil fuel PR campaigns?
 - how we deal with this as a TU-community, considering the different perspectives, dependencies, experiences
- how do we make sure our research is objective?
- how do we make sure our education is future-proof?
 - do we owe it to our students to teach about fossil fuel-based technologies, because they will be part of the future?
- practically: what alternatives would we turn to, if we were to cut ties?
 - can we really cut ties, considering that fossil fuel needs are so high right now and so interwoven with everything we do?
 - would it make sense to cut ties completely, considering fossil fuels will remain part of our lives regardless?
 - what would be good alternatives?

Appendix II- teksten van alle vliegtuigjes

id	what deserves our attention most/greatest challenge?
1	a collaboration of TU Delft's employees and students and other individuals to feel listened to in order to achieve a more aware society that stands for an action to mitigate in climate change
2	improve the understanding of what we as a university want, then what the pros and cons of cutting or limiting collaboration with the fossil fuel industry are and, lastly, what the consequences of cutting ties would be.
3	an open dialogue on what is a better society?
4	not making a decision or not following the advice that is constructed from this, is not a neutral act. Every action taken or not taken is a political statement. Represent your knowledgeable researchers & think of the future of your young students. Will you be able to look them straight in the eye after your decision?
5	university is a frontrunner in society (and has always been). We should get out of our science bubble and preach more. Explain society why we think what we do. That way fossil industry will get less interesting/important instantly
6	the advice might be to make a difficult and political decision. Please remember that we support this decision and back you up if needed.
7	focus on governance of the decision. Who will decide on this particular topic; address the topic of academic freedom in order to make (???) that the board make decisions from the top without taking researchers' opinion into account: - which criteria can be met; - what does collaboration mean?
8	work on our academic independence so we can say no to industry if needed --> help government to develop regulations
9	all actions by TU Delft should be in line with the Paris Agreement, and TU Delft reduces dependencies on organisations that do not follow this. - make a shared statement with other universities; - invite Shell for an open debate
10	- full accounting of who we collaborate with; - transparency in terms of agreements, guidelines & regulations; - stop non-essential collaboration; - get a better sense of what we mean when we talk about 'influencing' our collaborators; - take a public stand on subsidies
11	- Assess TU Delft's current dependencies on FFI; - cut out those dependencies; - to prevent greenwashing: end all collaborations with companies whose business includes the sale of FF; - if any collaborations are necessary, asses them with an ethics committee that includes diverse participants and representatives; - educate students toward careers outside FFI
12	- come up with a sustainable vision toward FFI; - promote Paris agreement and let everybody commit to it; - educate engineers with a good sustainable mindset
13	the board could already issue a strong public statement that they will critically revise collaborations with FFI. Details to follow at the end of the process.

14	- transparency and trust between fossil fuel companies and academia?; - interdependence between research topics to maintain status quo and make it more efficient or research another path that can be taken
15	decouple education from the fossil fuel industry
16	the university should decide to what extent it has a societal responsibility to act as a moral compass
17	challenge: convince the FFI to participate in more research projects for sustainable development
18	set the example & inspire other universities to do the same
19	clarity on policy and status without fear of calling out actors which may challenge the policy
20	main challenge: - to not shift responsibility elsewhere --- what needs our attention: - avoiding being manipulated by FFI; - to not loose as a university and the country
21	attention: the question if climate change, although occurring, is such a pressing problem that it requires such radical action as severing ties with a whole industry
22	attention: spreading knowledge about what needs to be done and what can be done. The university can spread awareness to students, employees, industry, and policy makers.
23	encourage to plant 10 trees per person! - problem is: lack of awareness; challenge is: binary thinking
24	- inform about € on fossil research; - inform everybody on what academic freedom actually means
25	- airplanes flying on electricity; - more trains and electric cars; -public cars
26	- practice what you preach; how to make the collaborations transparent
27	TUD must focus on the education of engineers: - energy transition; climate science/adaptation -- collaboration with companies on THESE topics is essential
28	- develop a screening process; - include community & industries; identify the challenges within the energy transition; - develop ecosystem for the same
29	Please move away from feelings and choose the path of dialogue to identify relevant concerns to decide collectively instead of dictating decisions that may prove detrimental
30	- make discussion very public; - take a strong stance against greenwashing and act accordingly
31	ask ourselves if the executive board's links to the fossil fuel industry is a conflict of interest in making the decisions on the ties of the TU Delfts with Shell or Gasunie
32	What is the vision for research that the TU has? The climate is facing a global crisis. It is no one's 'responsibility' to solve, but in what way does TUD want to contribute to solve some of the issues that are large concerns for our future and can we trust companies that caused this crisis?
33	do not make emotional or fast decisions. This needs careful discussions. Think IPCC! Can we put something like this together? -- NUANCES --
34	I would say that cutting ties is a bit too extreme as you should think of "who" replaces them. So maybe the next step would be to look for companies that can give the same to the university as these fossil fuel companies can give. As a university, we need connections for our research, but also to get information on what to improve
35	Attention: - we can emit 390 Gt CO2 max to stay below 1.5 K; - we need transfer of resources from fossil fuel to sustainable energy: voice this to public, government etc.; - fossil fuel companies are expanding to developing countries

36	attention: - transparency about current collaborations this supports decision-making; - 'eigenaarschap'/ownership over the solution. Be ready to make brave choices and communicate clearly about them.
37	TU Delft should screen ongoing as well as future research to see if it has a positive impact on society
38	- democratic and informed process to decide what the collaboration with the fossil fuel industry will look like at TU Delft.; - options for research screening
39	attention: TUD should collaborate with FFI. Because FF companies (big oils) have the most competence to push energy transformation. E.g.: oil company traditional knowhow --> Contribution for transformation (see table)
40	This is a complicated problem that requires a vision and maybe a common goal and incentive to realistically realise our ambition to lead innovation, rather than pointing at problems
41	make clear where we cooperate. Be fully open!
42	decide on the message you want to send to students and start creating strategy from there: - do we want students to work for FFI?; - teach them how to evaluate if their possible connection to FFI will benefit the society?
43	we need to be brave and look for alternative ways to (financially) run our university
44	We need to drive the energy transition to limit temperature rise. This includes financial and knowledge transfer from fossil energy to alternative energy forms that do not increase CO2-levels in the atmosphere
45	attention: 'simply ensuring that there are no conflicts of interest in the domains of research and properly defining what "collaboration" means. Inherently, the FFI encompasses the petrochemical industry and knowledge in that field is critical and crucial to the transition. Ensuring collaboration such that the knowledge gained can do the most good for society is the responsibility of a knowledge institution, subsequently barring or blocking collaboration is not.
46	elaborating for the public on what aspects TUD strongly disagrees (and cut ties) with fossil fuel industry
47	attention: the unbalanced relationship between us and them: the fossil fuel companies have much more knowledge, expertise and human resources than TUD (at least in geosciences). Challenges: not weighing enough in the table of discussion: teaming up with other universities CLARIFICATION: This is not a wish to keep collaborating. It is however to express the knowledge that one has to keep in mind in order to cut the ties properly. I am actually in favour of cutting ties. But cutting ties with no precaution or no backup plan will be detrimental to TUD. I realized that TUD benefits from the FFI collaboration, so an alternative has to be set up, beforehand or simultaneously, in order to replace the lack that cutting ties will imply.
48	short term: openness about how the collaboration is happening now, including numbers. And clear guidelines from TU Delft on how TU Delft will collaborate with fossil fuel companies
49	TU Delft needs to take a stand, cannot leave it up to individual. How to guide 'decision' whether or not collaboration is 'allowed' (science, ethics)
50	Be an example: academic freedom + support energy transition. Together
51	attention: opinion of students!!! You are educating the future. Please know that the majority of students is against fossil fuel companies. Cut the ties. With this, you can make a nice statement to the public and create awareness. We don't need them and see if the

	departments that do need them can be helped in another way, or cut the departments from TU Delft
52	attention: - what is the FFI's standing on energy transition? - what is the change? Challenge: - the change needs to be redefined and defined; - they will remain central
53	1. reveal existing regulations: allow public discussions about how we can improve these regulations. 2. Urgently cut all unessential ways of collaborating. E.g. career events etc.; 3. Take a clear stand, as TU Delft and make it public. We are a public university and have our duties in front of society
54	- urgently create a code of conduct that sets clear guidelines concerning collaboration with FFI and has compliance with the Paris agreement as a criterion; - limit the platform of these companies at TUD (e.g. lunch lectures)
55	the university by itself cannot be the solution. The fossil fuel companies have the knowledge and power and continue by themselves. The university though is part of the society and should set an example for the changes to come. No funds from fossil fuel companies
56	to the executive board: - we need transparency on which projects are funded by FFI + how much of the project is funded by them and how much by TUD. - we need a TUD regulation on how to deal with FFI when collaborating with them
57	1. there needs to be a report quantifying the actual influence of FFI at TUD. (research funding, talks, image, collaboration, projects, ..). 2. going forward, clear guidelines are needed for collaboration -- with whom, why, under what conditions --> both open to everyone
58	- disentangling the discourse to around the type: --> 'rights' to be in value of us vs resources and 'needs' vs 'wants'; - moving beyond a 'two s' model at looking at the debate; - release the resources and power that TUD has; - engage in generative critique and create for the ways forward
59	attention: - support the transition; - provide the knowledge for trust
60	we are wasting valuable time politely dialoguing about the greatest problem of our time. We are being blackmailed by criminal corporations who control the world's energy supply. We are waiting for a decision to be made by people with conflicts of interest, unelected and uncaring
61	making sure that TU Delft, as a public institution works to improve society, including on an environmental level. That may result in questioning and/or stopping certain partnerships with industry
62	transparency about the extent and nature of the collaboration with the fossil fuel industry; - confidence in that those decisions are made for the right reasons
63	collaboration under strict sustainable research goals
64	- be more critical of cooperating (by developing guidelines + advising committee, but do NOT exclude it; - assess the impact of the research: -- benefitting only the company, is it a very niche area, with only limited application?; -- how will it contribute to the energy transition? Or other positive societal impact?
65	TUD should only collaborate with FFI if the collaboration will have a measurable benefit for society
66	Dare taking big action, even if the approach is unconventional or controversial: start with a clear "No" as a statement towards the most polluting companies. Do not allow these big polluters to influence us any further
67	collaborate, shape students into transitional thinkers --> TUD structure needs transparency

68	Make sure that there is ongoing deliberation about the relation with industry (and government)
69	Set generic rules on cooperation (not topics or industries, but rules on interdependence, publication, refraining from influencing education etc). Be open about all external cooperations
70	facilitate more discussions between colleagues and others in the university/faculties
71	TUD should put more effort in organising debates etc on the ethical side of research. General so not with the people who usually join these meetings. Much more work for Studium Generale
72	People should be motivated to get out of their comfort zones and shift their consumer demands. Only then will fossil fuel companies change.
73	We need to set the agenda as TUD when it comes to collaboration. We can be more mindful of the societal impact our research has?
74	- all collaborations with FFI need to be made transparent (how much money goes into what projects); - we need to develop criteria to decide on collaborations on a project basis --> there needs to be a committee that assesses critical project and checks if they fulfil the criteria
75	make sure that the decision-making body includes members with all viewpoints. So fossil fuel leads, activists, researchers. From the start.
76	- Engineer Energy Transition Committee - university level; - transparency around all research; - departments: open discussions round research direction
77	Look into the conditions that make sure that the main benefit from the collaboration is for the society. Be clear and transparent with society about such conditions
78	TUD should strive to teach engineers capable to be ethically responsible. Ensuring future fossil fuel technologies are responsible and still well integrated in the community
79	- be transparent: -- about decisionmaking and --about the TU's collaboration with FFIs (story to society); - think of the TU's responsibility in the energy transition; - explore the grey area of collaboration. What condition/demands can we ask of companies?
80	transparency
81	Don't limit academic freedom with symbolic gestures
82	- strengthen collaboration with fossil fuel industry on climate/sustainable topics; - initiate a permanent moral deliberation chamber accessible to anyone who requests it; - create a low-level benchmark to assess viability of collaborations --> NON-DEFINITIVE!
83	- provide more time, space & money/emphasis to ethical discussions; keep academic freedom; - try to create a more 'random' awarding system for research money --> make Shell invest in research of TU Delft, maybe not yet specified to which project
84	collaboration is not black & white. We need a clear framework under which conditions we collaborate with companies. In my opinion, should contain: -- adherence of the company to Paris agreement/SDGs; -- public, open support for (climate) science and distancing from disinformation; -- full transparency about scope of project and, in case we collaborate, defend why we do so
85	create awareness among researchers about SDGs, so that they take this into account during planning their research
86	- establish agreed values; - set conditions for cooperation based on the agreed values
87	Dare to be selective (and say no) when working with industry (not only fossil one) when they are not adhering or willing to work towards a clearly defined framework for sustainability. Transparency + shared responsibility is key.

88 Taking ownership over the story/pathway to the future. Together with other universities publicly state intention to work towards a regenerative future. And be honest about the benefits (social + economical + technical) that FFI gets from funding research