

Briefing – Fossil Free Careers Policy Proposal

Date: 26.05.2023

Audience: Welfare Zone

What is the current situation at UCL related to this proposal?

UCL Careers Service current policy states that they will ‘allow any graduate employer to attend careers events, provided they are offering legally compliant opportunities, that would not bring UCL into disrepute’¹. They state that this ‘impartial stance puts emphasis on students’ freedom of choice’. UCL subscribe to The Careers Group and their policies around job advertisements. While no specific type of company is excluded from their policies they do ‘reserve the right not to advertise’ vacancies ‘that it considers unsuitable for students’².

173 students have signed a petition calling for UCL careers department to refuse all new relationships with oil, gas, or mining companies, decline to renew any current relationships with oil, gas, or mining companies after the contractually obligated period ends, and adopt a publicly available Ethical Careers policy that explicitly excludes oil, gas, and mining companies from recruitment opportunities³.

Aside from careers, UCL have made policy commitments in the past to cut ties with fossil fuel companies. In 2019, after five years of campaigning by Fossil Free UCL and Students’ Union UCL, UCL committed ‘not to invest in companies involved in fossil fuel extraction or production’⁴, a commitment that formed part of the UCL Sustainability Strategy⁵. In April 2020 UCL Council approved a policy for socially responsible investment which commits UCL to adopting investing strategies that ‘minimise and ideally eliminate irresponsible corporate behaviour’⁶. This includes avoiding companies involved in environmental degradation, armament sales to military regimes, human rights violations and racial or sexual discrimination.

There are, however, ongoing links between UCL and oil, gas, and mining companies. For example, an Independent investigation in 2020 revealed that UCL’s Earth Sciences department had received £901,396 in funding from fossil fuel companies between 2015 and 2020⁷. UCL’s Mullard Space Science Laboratory deliver training courses to industry and in 2022 listed BP as one of their training clients⁸. The Engineering department have an upcoming event in February run by ExxonMobil.

UCL’s sustainability plan states that ‘we want to lead by example’ by ‘fully integrating sustainability into our planning, processes and culture’⁹. According to People & Planet (the largest student network in the UK campaigning for social and environmental justice), UCL is considered a “1st class” university. In their 2021/2022 independent league table of UK universities ranked by environmental and ethical performance, UCL came 19th

¹ [Employer Engagement Policy | UCL Careers - UCL – University College London](#)

² [JobOnline policies and statements | University of London](#)

³ [Fossil Free Careers UCL! | People & Planet \(peopleandplanet.org\)](#)

⁴ [UCL divests from fossil fuels as it launches bold new sustainability strategy | UCL News - UCL – University College London](#)

⁵ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/sustainable/sustainability-ucl/change-possible-strategy-sustainable-ucl-2019-2024>

⁶ [Ethical Investment | Sustainable UCL - UCL – University College London](#)

⁷ [Russell Group universities received £60m in funding from coal, oil and gas sector in last five years | The Independent](#)

⁸ [brochur.pdf \(ucl.ac.uk\)](#) p14

⁹ [Change Possible: The Strategy for a Sustainable UCL 2019 - 2024 | Sustainable UCL - UCL – University College London](#)

out of 154, and was awarded a ‘1st Class Award’ by the group. However, for the ‘ethical careers and recruitment’ category, UCL scored 15/100¹⁰.

In 2021 the University signed up to the U7+ climate pledge, developed by an international coalition of university presidents. UCL provost, Michael Spence, stated ‘we recognise the devastating impact that climate change can have on the most vulnerable communities’ and that ‘we are proud to be empowering the next generation of brave thinkers to take action now’¹¹.

A similar policy proposal was previously put forward at the third welfare zone of the year. At that time, students did not vote in favour of the proposal.

This proposal has been updated to also include societies and clubs being prohibited from being able to receive any sponsorship or funding from oil, gas, and mining companies. As it stands, the Students’ Union already has a strong ethical policy relating to its own activities. It has an internal ban on receiving sponsorship or advertising from any fossil fuel companies and will not partner with them for any events or activities.

What would change if the policy was successful?

Students’ Union UCL would publicly support the Fossil Free Careers campaign and their three demands to the UCL careers department. This support would include relevant full-time and part-time officers actively working with the Fossil Free Careers campaign group and People & Planet, setting up meetings with relevant university staff, and using SU social media channels to amplify petitions, statements, and other calls to action from the Fossil Free Careers campaign.

What is the relevant national / international context to this situation?

In 2021 People & Planet launched a UK-wide campaign for all universities to end oil, gas, and mining recruitment on their campus. Prior to this, 20% of university careers services held industry-wide exclusions on ethical grounds. These exclusions primarily apply to the tobacco industry (10% of UK universities), the sex industry (12%) and the gambling industry (1%).

In September 2022 Birkbeck, University of London became the first university to ban oil, gas, and mining recruitment¹². In December 2022 three more universities – Wrexham Glyndwr, University of Bedfordshire, and University of the Arts London – did the same¹³. According to People & Planet 10 UK Students’ Unions have so far committed to boycott oil, gas, and mining recruitment events¹⁴. The National Union of Students (NUS) and University and College Union (UCU) also support the campaign.

Are there any legal implications to this policy proposal?

The Students Union would only be able to publicise future petitions and publicity from the campaign group if they linked directly to student issues, and so were within the Unions charitable purpose.

¹⁰ [University College London - People & Planet University League 2022: Full results | People & Planet \(peopleandplanet.org\)](#)

¹¹ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2021/oct/ucl-joins-u7-university-climate-pledge>

¹² [Fossil fuel recruiters banned from UK university careers service | Fossil fuel divestment | The Guardian](#)

¹³ [Fossil fuel recruiters banned from three more UK universities | Fossil fuels | The Guardian](#)

¹⁴ [Fossil Free Careers Victories | People & Planet \(peopleandplanet.org\)](#)

Does this relate to any existing SU policy?

No

Are there any financial, resource or stakeholder / public relations issues with this policy proposal?

This policy could create media coverage both positive and negative for the Union as it is a strong ethical choice, but could also be highlighted as an example of a 'no platform' style policy limiting freedom of choice for students.

Are there any sustainability implications to this item for discussion?

Yes – it would encourage more sustainable career choices for UCL graduates.

Are there any equity and inclusion implications to this item for discussion?

No

What would the next steps be if the proposal passed?

Students' Union UCL would publicly support People & Planet's Fossil Free Careers campaign and the following three demands on the UCL Careers Service:

- » Refuse all new relationships with oil, gas, or mining companies
- » Decline to renew any current relationships with oil, gas, or mining companies after the contractually obligated period ends
- » Adopt a publicly available Ethical Careers Policy that explicitly excludes oil, gas, and mining companies from recruitment opportunities

The first step would be announcing support for the policy on the website and raising this issue directly with the Careers Service, with other UCL senior staff and via the relevant university committees.

If this was not successful then follow up steps could include submitting a formal paper on this topic to UCL committees, and using SU social media channels to amplify petitions, statements, and other calls to action from the Fossil Free Careers campaign.

The Union already would not allow oil, gas, or mining companies access to SU-organised events or lend the SU name, logo or endorsement to events which include these companies, and would not allow the presence of oil, gas, and mining companies in any SU-controlled physical or digital space.