

University of Exeter: it's time to break up with Shell.

By Emma de Saram

Summary:

- The University of Exeter has announced a research partnership with Shell focussed on carbon sequestration.
- This decision was made without consulting some of the University of Exeter's key stakeholders including climate scientists.
- There is significant evidence that Shell has no intention of winding down its fossil fuel operations, despite key scientific evidence showing that there can be no new oil and gas projects if we are to limit global warming to 1.5C, as agreed by the Paris Agreement of 2015.
- The University of Exeter's 2030 Strategy commits to sustainability and collaboration, yet this partnership does not reflect these values.
- If you would like to get involved with these discussions please get in touch with emma.desaram@exeterguild.com. We are asking for a meeting with the University of Exeter in the New Year to discuss these matters.

On Wednesday, I was part of the panel for the '[Partnerships for Progress](#)' event run by the University of Exeter. According to the event description, 'The aim of this event is to engage students and staff in active discussions about the role of partnerships in overcoming today's challenges and providing solutions for a better tomorrow, and to provide an opportunity for us to talk about partnerships and arrangements that some may consider controversial'.

However, that is far from the truth.

From my view as a climate justice activist involved in many aspects of the University's climate action and education, and Vice President Liberation and Equality at the Students' Guild, the event was organised in response to two synchronously interwoven events.

One, the global student led movement 'End Fossil', which travelled to Falmouth University as students [occupied their lecture theatre at the start of November](#). These students demanded people's assemblies to facilitate discussions between Falmouth and Exeter, around important topics relating to the climate crisis including how university policies perpetuate the system that is causing the crisis. The campaign also demands Exeter and Falmouth stop aiding the recruitment of jobs in the fossil fuel industry - '*Everyone knows fossil fuels are killing us, the only moral thing to do is disassociate from oil and gas companies*'. Behind the scenes, I caught wind of some hesitation amongst some University leadership about how to best navigate greater student action on University ties with fossil fuel companies. Setting up the event was a way for Exeter to demonstrate its openness and transparency around climate action and this partnership.

Second, on 28th November, it was announced on internal University communications that '*The University has signed a **five year contract to work with Shell** on a nature-based solutions project for carbon sequestration in Brazil and the UK which will contribute to the transition to net zero. This planned research is part of a wider Shell-led research programme focussed on carbon sequestration, which aligns with Shell's target to be a net-zero*

emissions energy business by 2050.' (read more about this [here](#)). The panel discussion was nothing short of an attempt for the University senior leadership to tackle potential student activism and criticisms of the Shell partnership, despite the Executive Council already making the decision behind closed doors. The timeline of events couldn't make it clearer that this event was a retrospective attempt to have the public conversation about a further partnership with Shell that should have been had a long time ago.

Most infuriating was that this event took place just following my graduation where it was proudly announced that the University of Exeter is [home to 5 of the 100 world leading climate scientists](#). Most of these individuals were not consulted about this partnership, nor were the students who have been actively engaged with climate action and sustainability work on campus. I was the student representative on the panel, and after putting across my points about the need for the University to live up to its climate credentials and set the standard for how to navigate the transition away from fossil fuels, it was explained to me every reason why I was wrong. However much the other panellists tried to move the conversation on from Shell to other partnerships, they couldn't steer the conversation away from it. I will say that I received a kind follow up email inviting me to request future topics for discussion, however it's strategies like this where they try to greenwash over what's really going on that makes me lose complete faith in the institution. Their strategy of control, manage, set up a working group, dilute, carry on as normal with hierarchical decision making, won't allow us as a university or society to make the radical and system wide changes we drastically need to combat the worst effects of the climate crisis.

The reason that the University of Exeter believes this partnership is positive is not out of naivety nor hope, but because they've failed to interrogate Shell's motives and failed to engage with the facts. Shell has no intention of fundamentally changing its operation model - its logic is that it can continue burning oil and gas because it can offset these emissions through future unproven carbon capture technologies. It's worth going over the context, and the evidence.

Parties to the 2015 Paris Agreement pledged to limit global warming to well below 2 °C and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 °C relative to pre-industrial times. (1) However the United Nations Emissions Gap Report 2022 shows that updated national pledges since COP26 – held in 2021 in Glasgow, UK (which [myself](#) and other University of Exeter staff attended) – make a negligible difference to predicted 2030 emissions and that we are far from the Paris Agreement. The policies currently in place would take us to a 2.8°C temperature rise by the end of the century. People ask me, what does a world look like at 1.5, or 2.8C? They expect me to paint a graphic image of how awful everything will be, but the truth and evidence is already there. The heatwaves and extreme weather that we're already seeing will only become more frequent. *'Climate-related risks to health, livelihoods, food security, water supply, human security, and economic growth are projected to increase with global warming of 1.5°C and increase further with 2°C.'* (2)

In order to have any hope of staying within safe boundaries of warming, [most fossil-fuel reserves must remain untapped](#), and this means certainly no new projects. By 2050, nearly 60% of oil and fossil methane gas, and 90% of coal must remain unextracted to keep within a 1.5 °C carbon budget. (3) The International Energy Agency Net Zero by 2050 Report has explicitly stated that *'There is no need for investment in new fossil fuel supply in our net zero*

pathway: the IEA is normally a relatively conservative body.⁴ In short, investing in new fossil fuels infrastructure is '[moral and economic madness](#)'.

Shell has no intention of winding down fossil fuel operations.

A [report by Global Witness](#) shows that the world's biggest fossil fuel firms are projected to spend almost a trillion dollars on new oil and gas fields by 2030. Shell's planned spending on fossil fuels for 2022 - 2030 is **46 billion dollars**. Given that Shell is one of the companies most responsible for historic emissions, the least they could do is invest in a genuine renewable energy transition. Shell continues to develop new oil and gas fields which will liberate carbon, and drive global warming beyond 1.5°C. To avoid this, fossil fuels need to stay in the ground.

PERIOD 2022 - 2030.

Top 10 companies for projected fossil fuel development and exploration for the period 2022- 2030

Company	Total planned spend (Billion USD)	Planned gas spend (Billion USD)	Planned oil spend (Billion USD)
Gazprom	139	124	15
ExxonMobil	84	24	60
Chevron	67	10	57
Qatar Energy	66	56	10
Saudi Aramco	62	12	51
TotalEnergies	62	32	30
Petrobras	60	4	55
ConocoPhillips	58	2	56
Shell	46	28	18
CNOOC	38	11	27

Source: Rystad UCube - CAPEX spending 2022-2030 on fields in development or discovery phases. • [Get the data](#)

Furthermore, the announcement of the Shell partnership comes just a few months following the release of documents from the [US Committee on Oversight and Reform](#) that show how the Fossil Fuel Industry is misleading the public about their commitments to reduce emissions. The contents of these documents were not surprising, yet substantiate the argument that Shell has manufactured a net zero strategy that liberates them from legal or

public accountability, and puts significant resources into attractive marketing strategies that paint a completely different picture. There are countless examples in the 226 page evidence document, but to pick out a few illustrates the extent of Shell's greenwashing and devotion to a long-term fossil fuel future.

Shell has tried to create the impression of taking ambitious steps to reduce emissions - this is far from the truth. The concept of net zero itself is also a [dangerous trap](#) because it provides a get out of jail free card through throwing money and marketing at future technologies. It fails to get to the root of the problem which is that we cannot afford new oil and gas. [The documents](#) show Shell stating that '*we have no immediate plans to move to a net-zero emissions portfolio over our investment horizon of 10-20 years*' [p. 200]. Furthermore, internal Shell messaging guidance urges Shell employees, "*Please do not give the impression that Shell is willing to reduce carbon dioxide emissions to levels that do not make business sense.*" [p. 193]. Finally, and most relevant for the University of Exeter is that the documents demonstrate that part of Shell's strategic aims is '*maintaining a strong societal licence to operate*'. [p. 187]. By a world leading university in climate science partnering with them, Shell is able to further strengthen that social licence. In summary, the evidence and US House of Representatives committee has found that these huge companies, including Shell, have consistently dismissed the need for rapid climate action.

Exeter's 2030 strategy includes a commitment to collaboration and sustainability. It states that , '*We will demonstrate leadership in rebuilding and regeneration through our response to the environment and climate emergency*'. There has been nothing about the process or substance of this decision that aligns with the values of the 2030 strategy. The University of Exeter is betraying its climate credentials, its students, staff and overall reputation by partnering with a fossil fuel company. Only last week it was announced that [Exeter moved to 6th place](#) in the People and Planet league table which ranks UK universities based on their sustainability and ethics. However, this does not account for the Shell Partnership.

HOW SUSTAINABLE IS YOUR UNIVERSITY? NEW RANKING OUT TODAY!



1ST CLASS UNIVERSITIES



Constructive conversations need to be had with students and the world leading scientists here. There is simply not the capacity nor time for fictitious scenarios in which we can rely on future technologies to get us out of the climate crisis. We cannot be providing a social licence for Shell to continue its fossil fuel operations through this partnership.

Students: we want to hear from as many of you as possible, so if you're interested in joining this campaign, please get in touch with me on emma.desaram@exeterguild.com.

University: we want a meeting with the CASPER team and stakeholders in the Shell partnership to discuss this in more depth in the new year.

1. Adoption of the Paris Agreement [ADOPTION OF THE PARIS AGREEMENT United Nations](#) (United Nations, 2015).
2. [Summary for Policymakers — Global Warming of 1.5 °C](#)
3. [Unextractable fossil fuels in a 1.5 °C world | Nature](#)
4. [Net Zero by 2050 - IEA](#) (p. 21).

[Oil firms have internally dismissed swift climate action, House panel says | Oil and gas companies | The Guardian](#)

[Emissions Gap Report 2022](#)

[Selected Investigation Documents - US House of Representatives Investigation Documents into Fossil Fuel Companies misleading the public.](#)

[Net Zero - The UK's contribution to stopping global warming - Climate Change Committee](#)

[Secretary-General Warns of Climate Emergency, Calling Intergovernmental Panel's Report 'a File of Shame', While Saying Leaders 'Are Lying', Fuelling Flames | UN Press](#)

[University of Exeter's new partnership with Shell is a mistake](#)