

Global South universities' role in the Just Transition can't be about divestment

Opinion piece by Prof Imraan Valodia, Pro Vice-Chancellor: Climate, Sustainability and Inequality, and Director: Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, University of the Witwatersrand (Wits)

In its determination to secure support for its divestment campaign, Fossil Free South Africa (SA) overlooks the more fundamental question of what Global South universities are actually for, failing to engage seriously with the institutional, developmental and historical complexities they face.



The recent report by Fossil Free South Africa (FFSA), [Carbon Captured](#), and the [subsequent article](#) in University World News raise important questions about the relationship between universities and the fossil fuel industry. Those questions deserve to be taken seriously. I [responded in brief](#) to the report, in University World News.

What follows is a longer response to the FFSA campaign, which I argue fundamentally misunderstands both the nature of climate transition in SA and the role of universities in the transition.

FFSA is running a campaign urging South African universities to support its campaign to divest from any fossil fuel companies. Its Carbon Captured? report and the subsequent coverage in University World News is an attempt to advance this campaign. In its report, FFSA makes three broad arguments. First, it contends that South African universities have developed relationships with fossil fuel companies that risk compromising their independence and public credibility. Second, it argues that these relationships undermine universities' ability to provide independent leadership on one of the defining challenges of our time. Third, it therefore concludes that universities should respond by divesting from these relationships and adopting institutional policies that distance themselves from the fossil fuel industry.

The report raises legitimate questions about the governance of university-industry relationships and the need to protect institutional independence. Those questions deserve serious consideration.

Had the FFSA report approached these questions with a fuller appreciation of the role of universities in the Global South, it could have made an important contribution. Sadly, it falls short. Rather than engaging seriously with the institutional, developmental and historical complexities facing universities in the Global South, it all too often substitutes innuendo for analysis, reaching conclusions before those complexities have been adequately examined.

We at Wits University have engaged with FFSA on these questions and will continue to do so. I have sought to explain why the role of a university in the Global South cannot be reduced to a strategy of divestment, and why the Just Transition poses far more complex institutional, developmental and historical questions. Unfortunately, those conversations have all too often returned to a single objective: persuading Wits to endorse the FFSA divestment campaign.

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The history of universities is one of continual reinvention. Medieval universities emerged as centres of learning with a degree of autonomy from church and state. The modern research university became the engine of scientific discovery and technological innovation. Across much of the Global South, universities assumed an additional responsibility: educating professionals, strengthening public institutions, advancing scientific capability and contributing to national development. Climate change demands another reinvention.

But that reinvention cannot look the same everywhere because a Just Transition looks different from Johannesburg than it does from Cambridge, Palo Alto or Oxford.

Universities in countries such as SA confront many transitions simultaneously. We are trying to decarbonise while creating jobs, reducing poverty and inequality, expanding energy access, strengthening industrial capability and building more inclusive economies. These objectives cannot be separated. Climate policy that ignores development will fail politically and economically. For the Global South, a Just Transition without an industrial development strategy is a dead end.

The report is so preoccupied with securing support for its divestment campaign that it overlooks the far more important questions of how societies in the Global South can achieve a Just Transition and what role universities should play in creating the knowledge, technologies, capabilities and institutions that such a transformation requires.

A Just Transition is not simply about reducing emissions. It is about transforming economies. It requires new technologies, new industries, new infrastructure, new skills, new job opportunities, new institutions and new forms of democratic cooperation. Universities have an indispensable role in helping societies make that transition.

Yet the report says remarkably little about how such a transformation is actually to occur.

Instead, it assumes that institutional divestment is the principal mechanism through which universities should contribute to climate action. But divestment is, at most, one possible tactic. It is not a strategy for transforming one of the world's most carbon-intensive economies.

Moreover, fossil fuels are not simply an energy source. They are embedded in the fabric of the modern economy and society. They underpin petrochemicals that produce plastics, polymers and synthetic fibres; fertilisers that support agricultural production and food security; pharmaceuticals, medical equipment and other products essential to modern healthcare; packaging, transport and logistics systems that move goods and people; and countless manufacturing processes that shape everyday life. Understanding this role of petrochemicals does not diminish the urgency of decarbonisation. Rather, it underscores the scale and complexity of the transformation required.

Taken to its logical conclusion, the report's argument would require universities to divest from and disengage with large parts of the South African economy. Should universities refuse to work with mining companies because mining is energy intensive? With steel manufacturers? The chemical industry? Agricultural businesses? Logistics firms? Airlines? Automotive manufacturers? Companies involved in plastics, polymers and pharmaceuticals? Where should the line be drawn?

The report never really answers these questions because it never seriously engages with the productive structure of the economy it seeks to transform.

SA's history makes this even more complicated.

Under apartheid, international sanctions, concerns about energy security and abundant coal reserves led the apartheid state to establish and support Sasol, which developed and commercialised the Fischer-Tropsch (FT) technology to convert coal into synthetic fuels. Over time, that capability became the foundation for a much broader petrochemicals industry producing plastics, polymers and synthetic fibres crucial for large segments of our industrial output in SA: from clothing, to food to pharmaceuticals.

That history created scientific capabilities, engineering expertise and industrial ecosystems that remain deeply embedded in the South African economy. Sadly, it also produced an industrial structure heavily dependent on fossil fuels, leaving SA with disproportionately high greenhouse gas emissions. History creates path dependency. It also explains why the transition in SA is so complex. Companies such as Sasol, and many of those linked to Sasol's FT technologies, now face an existential challenge. They must fundamentally reinvent their technologies, products and business models in a carbon-constrained world. That transformation is essential – but it will not be simple.

Engagement with these challenges does not mean adopting the commercial interests of companies such as Sasol as the university's own. Quite the opposite. It means bringing independent science, engineering, economics, public policy and the wider public interest to bear on one of the most difficult industrial transformations South Africa has faced. Universities should challenge, question and hold companies to account. But they should also help ensure that the transition is technologically feasible, economically inclusive and socially just. Helping society solve precisely these kinds of technological, scientific and industrial challenges is one of the reasons universities exist.

This is also why simply importing divestment strategies developed in North American universities is inadequate. Those campaigns emerged in institutions with multibillion-dollar endowments where investor activism could become a significant lever for change. South African universities occupy a very different position. Our influence lies less in our investment portfolios (which are, in the larger scheme of things, negligible) than in the knowledge we generate, the graduates we educate, the technologies we develop and the public debates we shape. Simply transplanting a strategy developed for one institutional context into another overlooks the distinctive role universities play in the Global South.

The report also misunderstands the nature of academic freedom.

Academic freedom is not freedom from engagement. It is the freedom of scholars to pursue evidence wherever it leads, within established ethical rules and institutional governance. Universities preserve that freedom not by avoiding engagement but by ensuring that governments, corporations, donors, activists and campaign organisations cannot dictate what is researched, what is taught or what is published.

The report mistakes isolation for independence.

The same principle applies to public debate. Universities are among the few places in society where competing ideas can be tested under conditions of reasoned argument. We are not in the business of preventing politicians, business leaders, activists or members of civil society from speaking simply because members of the university community disagree with them. Universities should expose students to competing ideas, not shield them from controversy.

The test of a university is not whom it allows onto its campus. It is whether those who come can be questioned freely, challenged rigorously and answered with evidence.

Engagement is not endorsement.

It is perfectly possible to engage critically with governments while opposing their policies. Universities do so every day. It is equally possible to work with industry while remaining entirely independent of corporate interests. Research partnerships, technological collaboration and policy engagement do not, in themselves, amount to institutional capture. They become problematic only when they compromise academic independence, distort research or inhibit open inquiry. Those are serious matters. They require evidence, not inference.

This is precisely why the lessons from the tobacco industry are so important. The tobacco industry did not simply collaborate with universities. It deliberately sought to manufacture scientific doubt, undermine overwhelming evidence about the health consequences of smoking and influence public policy through the strategic funding of research. Where there is evidence that companies seek to manipulate science or compromise academic independence, universities should respond decisively. There can be no compromise on that principle.

But drawing parallels with the tobacco industry requires more than identifying relationships between universities and companies. It requires evidence that those relationships have compromised research integrity, academic freedom or institutional decision-making. The report repeatedly invites readers to infer institutional capture from proximity and association. It provides no evidence whatsoever that academic independence has in fact been compromised.

Universities should ultimately be judged not by isolated examples but by the totality of their contribution. At Wits, climate change is one of the university's strategic priorities. Every undergraduate now completes a compulsory course on climate change so that every graduate leaves with an understanding of the science, economics, politics and ethics of the climate crisis. To the best of my knowledge, Wits was the first university in the world – and remains among only a handful of universities internationally – to embed climate change education so centrally across the undergraduate curriculum. Our researchers work across renewable energy, climate adaptation, climate mitigation, biodiversity, urban resilience, green industrialisation, inequality and climate change, among others. These are not the actions of an institution indifferent to climate change.

At its heart, this is a disagreement about how change happens.

FFSA's implicit theory of change is that withdrawing legitimacy from existing institutions is the principal lever for transformation. My view is different. The greatest contribution universities can make is not by retreating from society's most difficult problems but by helping to solve them. Universities change societies by educating graduates, producing knowledge, advancing science, developing technologies, convening difficult conversations and helping governments, businesses, workers and communities navigate profound economic and social change.

If universities step back from these challenges, who will help create the future we seek? Who will develop the next generation of renewable energy technologies? Who will design the transport systems of a low-carbon economy? Who will help transform SA's industrial structure from one built around coal and synthetic fuels to one based on renewable energy, green hydrogen and sustainable manufacturing? Who will develop the new materials, industrial processes, financial instruments and public policies that a Just Transition requires? Who will educate the engineers, scientists, economists, lawyers, planners and political leaders who will have to build that future?

These are not questions that can be answered through disengagement. They require universities that are deeply engaged in scientific discovery, technological innovation, industrial development and democratic debate. Universities cannot simply demand the transition. They must help build it.

This is not a call for neutrality. It is a call for engagement without capture. Universities should work with governments without becoming instruments of government; with business without becoming apologists for business; and with civil society without becoming campaign organisations. Their legitimacy lies precisely in their ability to engage with all of these institutions while remaining

intellectually independent of each of them. That is a more demanding role than institutional withdrawal. It is also, I believe, a more consequential one.

None of this means universities should provide reputational cover for companies that delay climate action or misrepresent their environmental performance. Nor should they allow funders to influence research, appointments or publication. Those principles are non-negotiable.

But neither should universities become campaign organisations.

Their responsibility is different.

It is to ask difficult questions where others seek simple answers. It is to generate evidence where others rely on assertion. It is to develop the technologies, capabilities and ideas that enable societies to confront problems that no single institution can solve alone.

Climate change is one of the greatest challenges humanity has ever faced. Universities should welcome scrutiny of the choices they make and the partnerships they enter into. They should be transparent, accountable and open to criticism. But they should ultimately be judged not by whom they refuse to engage with, but by the knowledge they produce, the graduates they educate, the technologies they develop and the contribution they make to building societies that are more sustainable, more productive and more equal.

The task before us is not to retreat from the economy we have inherited. It is to help transform it. That is the responsibility of the university in the Global South. It requires independence. And rigorous academic work. It does not require isolation and divestment.

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The opinions expressed above are those of Prof Imraan Valodia, Pro Vice-Chancellor: Climate, Sustainability and Inequality, and Director: Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, Wits. He writes in his own capacity, and his views do not necessarily reflect the views of the [Executive Committee](#) or [members](#) of the NSTF.