



Open letter to the Council of the University of Cape Town: UCT must divest from fossil fuels and become a climate leader

By [Fossil Free UCT](#) and [UCT Green Campus Initiative](#). Submitted to UCT Council via email to the UCT registrar on 26 November 2021 at 11.49am. Change.org petition in support [here](#).

We have been advised that you will be considering whether or not to adopt the [groundbreaking recommendation](#) of UCT's University Panel on Responsible Investment – that UCT should divest from fossil fuels – at your meeting on 4 December 2021.

The context for your decision is a global and regional climate emergency. Between current trends and national emissions reductions commitments, the world faces, even after the Glasgow COP, up to 2.4C or more warming this century. South Africa, which warms at twice the global rate, therefore faces 5C or more warming. The Eastern Cape is right now gripped by an historic drought and Nelson Mandela Bay [may run out of water before Christmas](#). Wits scientists warn of a likely Day Zero scenario for Gauteng within 20 years.

At the recent COP26 climate summit, EU vice-president Frans Timmermans said: “If we fail [my one-year-old grandson] will fight with other human beings for water and food. That’s the stark reality we face. So [achieving] 1.5C is about avoiding a future for our children and grandchildren that is unlivable.”

In the grand scheme of things the decision you make on 4 December is not just about you. It is about your children, your students' futures, and the lives of millions of young people across the country who deserve a chance at life within a reasonably stable environment.

The climate emergency is still mostly fueled by the burning of fossil fuels, sold to us by companies that continue to receive [enormous irrational subsidies](#), that still maintain [undue influence](#) over governments, and that have conducted [massive disinformation campaigns](#) to create confusion about the reality and nature of global heating. One of their latest ploys is claiming they now recognise the climate emergency and are committed to eliminating fossil fuels. They express this purported ambition in the form of “net zero” targets that are in fact being used as cover for [continuing to expand fossil fuel extraction](#). The social influence of these companies must be ended, which is why divestment from them is vital (as is a just transition for their employees). Reinvestment in these companies cannot be based on their purported targets, but will be justifiable only if and when they have demonstrated consistent and rapid year-on-year real greenhouse gas emissions cuts.

UCT's own [Energy Systems Research Group has highlighted](#) that investing in new coal power will by far increase the cost of electricity in comparison to investment in renewables, and in the long term lead to significant job losses.

Some argue that the global south should not have to transform our energy sources as fast as the North. This amounts to arguing that the South must stick with antiquated, polluting, expensive industries that foster extensive corruption – while rich countries expand their competitive advantage with cleaner, more jobs-intensive technologies.

South Africa is the largest emitter in Africa and investing in new fossil fuels does [not align with](#) “South Africa’s fair share of the global mitigation effort required to adhere to the Paris Agreement temperature goal”.

Fossil fuels not only contribute to the climate crisis but continue to cause at least [5,000 deaths annually in South Africa’s coal belt](#) due to hazardous air pollution and have caused a quarter of the region’s households, in the region of 3.6 million people, to have children who suffer from asthma.

UCT should become a climate leader

As campaigners who have worked to persuade UCT to divest, we write to urge you to adopt [the UPRI’s divestment recommendation](#) in full, and further urge you to make the most of this opportunity for UCT to become a climate leader in South Africa.

That is to say, if you adopt the UPRI’s landmark recommendation (which should be a source of great pride to our institution), please also commit to:

- Publicly announcing your decision immediately.
- Plan for full divestment as fast as possible, with 2029 being the very outside target date for completing the process.
- Work together with other SA universities as far as possible. UCT need not wait for fossil-free investment options to be created; it can also actively catalyse their creation. We urge the VC and chair of Council to write to your counterparts at other SA universities formally inviting collaboration on seeding ethical low-carbon investment funds. Offer the UPRI recommendation as a template policy for other SA universities, which need not necessarily reinvent the UPRI process.
- Transparency over current investments.
- Annual updates on progress towards divestment.

Global news media have this year given blanket coverage to events like the IPCC’s latest report and the COP26 climate summit. But the South African media are all too often irresponsibly mute [on these issues](#), while SA government policy remains ambiguous with very mixed signals on climate from different parts of government. There is a dangerous vacuum of social leadership on climate change in our country. Clear signals that the climate emergency must be properly addressed are urgently needed from institutions such as UCT.

The Fossil Free UCT campaign

As you consider the UPRI’s recommendation, we want you to have as much background information as possible. We call your attention to the eight-year history of the Fossil Free UCT campaign, including our [original letter to former finance director Enrico Uliana](#), [endorsement of this campaign by Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu](#), [handover of petitions](#)

to former VC Dr Max Price by Green Campus Initiative (GCI) students, the [divestment explainer video](#) created by ACIDI students, the [2017 workshop on divestment co-hosted by GCI students and Dr Price](#), and the [three votes of Convocation](#) in favour of divestment. Here is a [timeline of the campaign's key moments](#).

Three petitions in support of the campaign have drawn over 7,000 signatures in total:

- [2021 GCI petition](#): “Urge UCT to Adopt Comprehensive Fossil Fuel Divestment Plan” (>5,000 signatures)
- [2020 Science Students Council petition](#): “Urge UCT to take decisive action on climate change before it's too late.” (928 signatures)
- [2014 Fossil Free UCT petition](#): “UCT to divest from fossil fuels and invest in sustainable energy” (1,054 signatures)

We also remind you of the various letters and petitions in support of divestment addressed to you during 2020, from these groups, organisations and individuals:

- September 2020 letter from 63 UCT academics
- November 2020 letter from five UCT climate scientists in the Climate Systems Analysis Group
- Bishops Global Issue Group
- African Climate Reality Project
- Climate Reality Project
- Southern African Faith Communities Environment Institute
- Ms Roz Prinsloo, climate reality leader
- the UCT Science Students Council
- Theo Covary, director of Unlimited Energy
- Lisa Shaw
- 70 members of Westerford High School's Green Schools Initiative

Why UCT must divest

Please consider the scope of the global movement for fossil fuel divestment, which is now the biggest of its kind in history. Media coverage of social movements dealing with climate issues is poor in South Africa, so it may surprise you to learn that the global divestment movement now spans nearly 1,500 institutions worth nearly \$40 trillion.

The full list of these institutions, which includes whole countries (such as Ireland), numerous cities (not least Cape Town and Durban), and universities such as Cambridge, Yale and Harvard, and many others, can be viewed here: <https://divestmentdatabase.org>.

UCT should divest as an act of social leadership that clearly signals to South African society at large – and the financial services industry in particular – that our people's destiny and welfare, and that of humanity at large, depends on ending the era of fossil fuels as quickly as possible. This is because the benefits of using fossil fuels are now far outweighed by their real but 'externalised' costs – climate destabilisation, unnecessary energy costs, deadly air and water pollution, biodiversity loss, undue job concentration, and corruption. Ending the

era of fossil fuels can bring numerous benefits to society and help unlock the social and economic malaises in which South Africa is bogged down.

We also alert you to the profound links between the fossil fuel divestment movement and our history of colonialism and apartheid in South Africa. The fossil fuel divestment movement drew direct inspiration from the anti-apartheid disinvestment movement of the 1980s. The global movement for climate justice that includes the divestment movement is an anti-colonial and anti-racist struggle for human rights that deserves your solidarity.

Another lens to consider in making your decision is that of social science, for fossil fuel divestment has been identified [by climate scientists](#) as a key “social tipping dynamic” for stabilising Earth’s climate.

While at scale, fossil fuel divestment does have real financial effects and is succeeding in raising the cost of capital for fossil fuel companies in some markets, it will be some time before that scale is reached in South Africa. Opponents of UCT divesting might say it will have no immediate direct financial impact on fossil fuel companies. They are correct, and this is irrelevant. Fossil fuel divestment is primarily a moral and ethical movement for justice, a profound way for us to signal to each other as human beings that there is no longer any place in society for companies who are willing to risk the very stability of our planetary home for the purposes of short-term profit-taking. As Robert Massie, an historian of the South African divestment movement, has said:

At no point during the South African divestment or in the fossil fuel movement does anyone care about the stock price of these companies. If you look at it through finance, you see no effect and therefore you conclude that there’s been no impact. But if you look at it through the discipline of history, you see that it’s incontrovertible that step by step by step it was the South African divestment movement that changed the public discourse, that transformed the decisions of corporations to get out of South Africa and our government, led by a Republican Senate, to pass a comprehensive sanctions bill. Well, one of the things that’s fascinating about it is that climate change has been one of those problems where we’ve been hoping that someone else would do something about it. But divestment has the impact of saying, what are your direct responsibilities? If you own stock in Exxon, if you’re receiving dividends from Exxon whose business model is to destroy the planet, do you feel comfortable with that? Do you endorse what they’re doing? Normally, when you own a stock, you’re endorsing their business plan. And so instead of pushing this off to someone else, it transforms people and institutions exactly as a democracy should.

If you have any further questions you wish to ask before making your decision, we would be happy to assist – please do contact us. (Our [campaign page](#) also has a list of frequently asked questions and answers.)

Lastly, please consider the words of Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu in making your decision:

The University of Cape Town is perhaps the leading university on the African continent. It is a centre of excellence for climate change research, and is home to many leading voices on human rights and social justice. It makes no sense for the university or any other institution to invest in companies that undermine our collective future. It makes little sense for any South

African institution to make new investments in mining coal – or fracking – in the name of economic development. We know these are the most short-sighted kinds of development. Their benefits will not last and their costs are immense – almost certain future danger and destruction for our most vulnerable people... People of conscience need to break their ties with corporations financing the injustice of climate change. I ask UCT to examine urgently the extent of your investments in fossil fuel companies and to make a strong commitment to phasing them out as soon as possible.