Transition to a fossil-free society

Assessment framework Maastricht University

1. Summary

UM seeks to ensure that the research conducted by its employees contributes to the transition to a fossil-free society. This is in line with the development within the (inter-)national field of academic institutions. Moreover, it will likely contribute to the implementation of CSRD standards with which UM will have to comply in the near future. A key element to achieve this objective is a thorough yet user-friendly, evidence-based process to assess research proposals. This paper defines the assessment framework for research proposals and outlines the process to apply it.

The assessment framework combines two basic checks:

1. Project check: Which effect does the project have on the transition to a fossil-free society?
2. Partner check: Is the prospective partner a fossil fuel company?

The process to apply the framework is embedded in the generic trajectory of any research proposal (Figure 3, page 8). An online self-check tool will be made available for researchers to determine which effect a research project has on the transition to a fossil-free society and whether the prospective partner is a fossil fuel company. In this self-check tool, there is potential for integration with assessments for other issues such as knowledge safety and human rights. After evaluating the impact of a research project on the transition to a fossil-free society through the self-check, researchers can take one of four next steps: Seek advice from the Committee, Stop the project, Adjust the project, or Proceed with the regular approval process. During this process, researchers can ask guidance from the Sensitive Partnerships Unit.

This assessment framework supports researchers in making responsible and well-informed decisions when exercising their academic freedom in research in the context of the transition to a fossil-free society, while also raising awareness of these critical issues. Academic freedom is a key value to be safeguarded by a university. At the same time, we also bear the responsibility to address societal challenges, such as sustainability.

2. Introduction

The transition to a fossil-free, climate-neutral society is one of the primary goals of the UM. Accordingly, mid-2023 the UM published a statement about tightening the rules on research collaborations with partners from the fossil fuel industry. The key objective of the statement is three-fold:

a) No longer collaborate with parties that obstruct the transition to a fossil-free, climate-neutral society, while simultaneously encouraging collaboration with parties working on solutions;
b) As a critical ally, use our scientific insights to evaluate the ongoing societal dialogue and debate, and
c) Make our own operations more sustainable and act as a role model by doing so.

The Executive Board has asked the Taskforce SUM2030 to come up with an assessment framework that should help the UM-community to decide on collaboration principles with the fossil fuel industry. In order to create this framework, SUM2030 has organized several dialogue sessions with the UM-community, collected detailed input from other universities and looked at existing tools and methods. In addition, SUM2030 has sought to embed the framework in the existing process for developing research proposals. This has resulted in an assessment framework and process presented in this paper. This draft framework was discussed in the beginning of May 2024 with several stakeholders of all faculties. Based on the input of these stakeholders, the assessment framework and decision making procedure has been sharpened and finalized.

The advice is to:

- adopt the proposed assessment framework and process as the new UM policy;
- to communicate to the UM scientific community and the public about the framework and its implementation;
- to articulate that this is a significant step in further aligning UM with the Paris agreement, and invite other universities, collaboration partners and suppliers to collaborate to develop similar steps;
- to allocate resources for implementation of the policy.

3. Rationale

We now have abundant and compelling scientific evidence for the need to act decisively to minimize the already occurring impacts of climate change, and prevent further damage.[1] The rapidly receding window of opportunity to prevent significant harm translates into increasingly urgent demands from citizens towards government, firms, financial institutions, but also higher education institutions. Such demands winnow necessary action down to two simple focal points: (1) reduction of CO2 emissions and (2) restricting/closing down the activities of the fossil fuel industry.

The latter course of action needs to be seen in relation to the way in which fossil fuels and derived products permeate all major systems of provision in our society. Simply put: eliminating the extraction and production of fossil fuels today would cause the collapse of for instance food and health systems tomorrow. Realistically, eliminating the fossil fuel dependency of our society will take decades.[2] This will take a process of transition of our systems for providing food, health, mobility, housing and clothing and other human needs that goes well beyond the policy horizons of 2030 and 2050.

The transition of these systems requires interdisciplinary knowledge development and transdisciplinary work, and as an academic institution it can be convincingly argued that our role is to contribute actively, as a:

[1] For a summary of the latest synthesis report of the IPCC: https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_SYR_SPM.pdf

[2] For a popular science underpinning of this point, see Smil, V. (2022). *How the world really works: The science behind how we got here and where We're going*. Penguin.

- thought leader and collaborator, pro-actively pushing our partners to join and accelerate the necessary process of change;
- critical friend, engaging in evidence-based interrogating of the perspectives put forward by different groups in society;
- role model, leading by example by transforming our operations to make them more sustainable.

With different nuances, this rationale is shared across Dutch universities. Therefore, in developing this framework, we have engaged with other universities across the Netherlands. Each institution is actively crafting its own assessment framework for collaborations with the fossil fuel industry. However, the approaches vary considerably: while some universities have adopted stringent criteria, refraining from entering new research partnerships with the fossil fuel industry unless rigorous standards are met, others take a more flexible stance, evaluating the research's potential contributions to the transition towards a fossil-free society. The proposed UM framework has carefully considered all approaches.

4. Assessment framework

The purpose of the framework is to raise awareness among researchers and facilitate well-informed decision-making regarding their research in the context of the transition to a fossil-free society. By focusing on two fundamental questions, the framework provides guidance on evaluating potential collaborations and projects:

1. Is the prospective partner a fossil fuel company?
2. What is the effect of the project on the transition to a fossil-free society?

An online self-check tool will be provided to assist researchers in evaluating their projects. Researchers are encouraged to use this tool during the preparation phase of their research proposals to ensure alignment with UM's sustainability principles. The framework revolves around two key questions:

1. Is the prospective partner a fossil fuel company?

Using an (external) list, the researcher checks if a prospective partners (see Annex A) can be classified as being part of the fossil fuel industry. We propose to use an external list at least initially, such as the GOGEL list published and maintained by Urgewald. GOGEL is a public database that provides a detailed breakdown of the activities of oil and gas companies worldwide. It covers 1,623 companies active in the upstream, midstream or gas-fired power sector. Companies listed on GOGEL account for 95% of global oil and gas production. [https://gogel.org/]

Potential answers to this question are *Yes* and *No*.

2. What is the effect of the project on the transition to a fossil-free society?

This question evaluates the extent to which a research project supports, hinders, or remains neutral regarding the transition to a fossil-free society. The assessment takes into account both direct

contributions (e.g., developing sustainable technologies or reducing greenhouse gas emissions) and indirect effects (e.g., influencing policies, behaviors, or systems that rely on fossil fuels). It considers whether the project aligns with efforts to reduce fossil fuel dependency and promote sustainable alternatives.

Potential answers to this question:

- *Positive*: The project actively contributes to reducing fossil fuel dependence, enhancing sustainability, or supporting innovations aligned with a fossil-free society.
- *Negative*: The project hinders progress by reinforcing fossil fuel-based systems or delaying the adoption of sustainable solutions.
- *Unknown*: The potential impact of the project cannot yet be determined due to insufficient information or emerging uncertainties.
- *Neutral*: The project's effects are ambiguous or may have both positive and negative elements, requiring further analysis or clarification.

Once these two questions are answered by the researcher (possibly in collaboration with the RSO or UM Sensitive Partnerships Committee), the combination of answers determines the next step:

Is the prospective partner a fossil fuel company	**What is the effect of the project on the transition to a fossil-free society?**			
	Positive	**Neutral**	**Negative**	**Unknown**
Yes	Seek advice from Committee	Seek advice from Committee	Stop, Adjust or Seek advice from Committee	Seek advice from Committee
No	Proceed from regular approval process	Proceed from regular approval process	Stop, Adjust or Seek advice from Committee	Seek advice from Committee

Next steps

After evaluating the impact of a research project on the transition to a fossil-free society, researchers can take one of four next steps: Seek advice from the Committee, Stop the project, Adjust the project, or Proceed with the regular approval process.

When seeking advice from the Committee, the researcher needs to provide information which answers the following four questions:

a) Is the prospective partner a fossil fuel company?

Using an (external) list, the researcher checks if a prospective partners (see Annex A) can be classified as being part of the fossil fuel industry. We propose to use an external list at least initially, such as the GOGEL list published and maintained by Urgewald. GOGEL is a public database that provides a detailed

breakdown of the activities of oil and gas companies worldwide. It covers 1,623 companies active in the upstream, midstream or gas-fired power sector. Companies listed on GOGEL account for 95% of global oil and gas production. [https://gogel.org/]

b) Does the prospective partner pursue a Paris compatible transition?

Using an external resource, the researcher checks if a prospective partner can be classified taking positive action to accelerate the transition to a 1,5 C-aligned world. We propose to use the "We mean Business fossil to clean campaign" resource, as it provides companies with clear guidelines on creating a Climate Transition Action Plan and provides a list of companies taking action. By checking this list, UM researchers can determine whether a company is actively pursuing a Paris compatible transition. [*https://www.wemeanbusinesscoalition.org/committed/*]

c) Is the prospective partner known to support action against climate change?

This step serves to check if a prospective partner is engaged in active obstruction of the fossil-free transition by lobbying against climate change action and policies. We propose to use LobbyMap, a platform measuring corporate climate policy engagement. It provides an independent, data-driven assessment of how the world's largest companies and their industry associations are influencing policy and regulations needed to transition the global economy towards zero emissions.

By checking the database, UM researchers can determine the level of active lobbying by prospective partners. [*https://lobbymap.org/LobbyMapScores*]

d) What is the effect of the project on the transition to a fossil-free society?

This question evaluates the extent to which a research project supports, hinders, or remains neutral regarding the transition to a fossil-free society. The assessment takes into account both direct contributions (e.g., developing sustainable technologies or reducing greenhouse gas emissions) and indirect effects (e.g., influencing policies, behaviors, or systems that rely on fossil fuels). It considers whether the project aligns with efforts to reduce fossil fuel dependency and promote sustainable alternatives.

Advice of the Committee

After reviewing the information provided by the researcher, the Committee advises to proceed or not to proceed with the partner or project. This advice is input for the normal decision-making procedure in each faculty (where a Dean, Research Director or Manager base their decision on the advice of the Committee).

In the implementation plan, it is important to note that the specific decision-making processes within each faculty differ slightly. We recognize that faculties have their own established structures and preferences for decision-making regarding project proposal applications. Therefore, SUM2030 and Academic Affairs will work collaboratively with each faculty to integrate the assessment framework in a way that aligns with their existing processes and organizational preferences. This tailored approach ensures both consistency in the application of the framework and respect for the autonomy of each faculty.

The objective is to make the assessment framework a realistic and functional part of the process. To achieve this, this assessment framework will be integrated as much as possible with frameworks that already exist or are in the making (Human Rights, knowledge security). The proposal is to set up one central location where UM staff can find the frameworks, conduct a self-check or ask questions about each of the assessment frameworks. Here, ease of use for the researcher/UM employee is paramount.

5. Sensitive Partnerships Committee

The Fossil assessment framework is closely linked to the already existing UM Assessment Framework International Collaboration and Knowledge Security (in Dutch: Toetsingskader Internationale Samenwerking en Kennisveiligheid, TISK), a framework enabling UM to assess the added value of, and potential knowledge security risks involved in, an international collaboration. The framework is also closely linked to UM's new Human Rights Due Diligence assessment framework. The HRDD, TISK and Fossil assessment frameworks help UM to make well-considered choices on the basis of which we can select our partnerships but also use them as a framework for dialogue with our partners.

In order to lower the burden of administrative processes for our staff and organisation as much as possible, we propose to align the processes of the three frameworks as much as possible. In concrete terms, the three UM frameworks will be aligned in the following ways:

1. The existing Knowledge Security Desk will be reframed into a 'Sensitive Partnerships Unit', which will become the first point of contact for the UM community to ask advice or raise concerns on a (potential or existing) partnership, for any questions/concerns on knowledge security, human rights violations, or partnerships with fossil industries. The Sensitive Partnerships Unit will function as a 'gatekeeper' and advisory unit, making an initial assessment of the risks involved in a partnership, and – where necessary – passing the case on to the relevant knowledge security, HRDD, or fossil industries committee for a more elaborate assessment.

2. We will create one core committee – the Sensitive Partnerships Committee – that will oversee three sub-committees for Knowledge Security, Human Rights Due Diligence, and Fossil industries (see figure 2). The overarching Sensitive Partnerships Committee will include four members: the chairs of the three sub-committees and an ethical expert. It will be supported by a secretary.

    - The chair of the Sensitive Partnerships Committee is a member of one of the subcommittees and appointed by the Executive Board.
    - The ethical expert (who is already part of the existing Knowledge Security Committee) and the secretary (the Advisor Knowledge Security, who already functions as the existing secretary of the Knowledge Security Committee) form the linking pin between the three sub-committees: the ethical expert is member in each sub-committee, ensuring that similar ethical considerations are taken into account in each sub-committee. The secretary ensures that the same process is followed.

- Each sub-committee will have a flexible layer of approximately 5 ad hoc experts that can be asked for advice on a case-by-case basis.
- The three sub-committee chairs meet twice a year as the sensitive partnership committee to discuss their working principles, and to ensure that they continue to follow the same processes. The use of one core committee helps the sub-committees to follow the same process. It also allows each committee to deal with the different content of their partnership cases; their members must have different kinds of expertise. For instance, there is a Dutch national guideline on the specific type of experts that ideally should be included in the Knowledge Security Committee. So far, half of the cases that are assessed by the Knowledge Security Committee concern the hiring of individual staff members – which is an issue that is not relevant for HRDD or Fossil industries committee members. By using three sub-committees, we can keep the committees focussed, small and efficient.

Sensitive Partnerships Committee

Members: Chairs of the three sub-committees and an ethical expert
Support: Secretary (i.e. the Advisor Knowledge Security)
Role: Ensuring alignment between the subcommittees

The Sensitive Partnerships Unit
Members: the Chair of the Knowledge Security Committee & the Secretary (Advisor Knowledge Security)
Role: Gateway to the subcommittees, data collection for assessment (with MUO-AA)

Knowledge Security	Human Rights Due Diligence	Fossil industries
KS1 (chair) Advisor Integral Security	HR1 (chair) (to be selected from list of applicants)	F1 (chair)
KS2 Advisor Knowledge Security (secretary)	HR2 Advisor Knowledge Security (secretary)	F2 Advisor Knowledge Security (secretary)
KS3 Ethical expert	HR3 Ethical expert	F3 Ethical expert
KS4 Information Expert	HR4	F4
KS5 Internationalisation Advisor	HR5	F5
KS6 HR staff member		
KS7		

N.B. 'KS' refers to a member of the Knowledge Security sub-committee; 'HR' refers to a member of the HRDD sub-committee; and 'F' refers to a member of the Fossil industries sub-committee.

Figure 2: Sensitive Partnerships Committee

Practical requirements for implementing the assessment framework

Online assessment tool – To enable a user friendly and timely assessment procedure, it needs to be facilitated by an online assessment tool accessible to all UM researchers. This tool should preferably include the option to integrate other assessment frameworks within UM. The tool empowers researchers to assess the involvement of potential fossil fuel companies, evaluating their stance on the Paris Agreement and their level of advocacy regarding climate change action.

Evaluation – The framework (and the use of external lists on which it partially relies) might require updating based on internal experience and based on ongoing discussions about collaboration with other universities.

6. Decision making

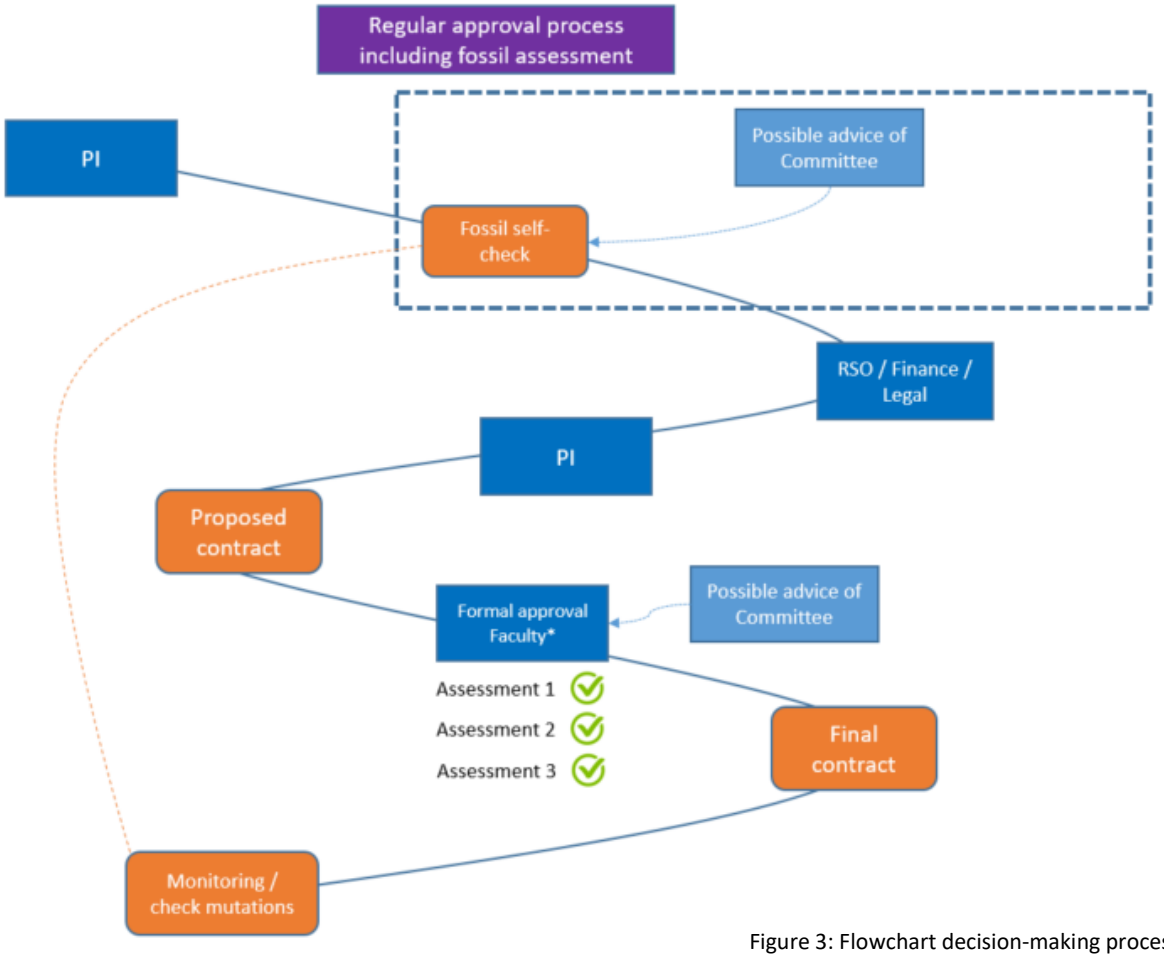

Figure 3: Flowchart decision-making process
*Depending on faculty decision-making process

The flowchart above gives a general overview of the decision-making process for research proposals. Since this process differs slightly per faculty, we will work collaboratively with each faculty to integrate the assessment framework in a way that aligns with their existing processes and organizational preferences. The implementation plan will provide an overview of the approaches per faculty.

Generally, the PI must go through the online self-check (possibly with the help of the SPU or RSO). The self-check supports the PI in determining the next steps. If necessary, the PI can reach out to the Committee and ask for advice. The advice of the Committee will then become part of the regular approval process. If the self-check determines that no advice is needed from the Committee, a provisional contract is drafted. This provisional contract goes to the competent entity of the faculty to formally approve the collaboration. Once approved, the contract can be signed. If changes occur during the term of the contract regarding existing or new partners, the PI must again go through the self-check.

Annex A – Definition research partner

In terms of the proposed assessment procedure, a key consideration must be addressed:

1. A collaborating partner is defined as an entity that contributes either financially or in-kind to the proposed project and plays a significant role in its realization or utilization of knowledge, and/or engages in any form of communication about being a partner in the proposed project. This definition also extends to zero-budget partners, which are entities that do not receive or provide financial resources for the project but contribute through other means, such as expertise, data, access to facilities, networks, or advisory roles. This includes but is not limited to, companies, public and private organizations, and other institutions.
2. Collaborative partnerships with the fossil fuel industry can manifest in diverse forms, including financial support, in-kind contributions like the use of industry infrastructure. While this framework evaluates several aspects related to such collaborations, particular attention is given to explicit partnerships as defined under 1.