

Divest-Invest: Case Study Durham University

This case study was developed through interviews with Max Emmett - a member of Durham People & Planet during their Fossil Free Campaign - and Megan Croll - President of Durham Students' Union 2017-18. It has been created to document the history of Durham's successful Divest-Invest campaign and to act as a case study to support other folk campaigning on divestment and reinvestment.

What campaign are you from and what were your demands to the university?

Durham.

When we started 3 years ago we had one clear demand:

"Divest from all fossil fuels - specifically those held with the external fund manager Sarasin and Partners".

To what extent were your campaign demands met?

Completely. The university were quite good with their handling of divestment - albeit quite slow! Through the Divestment Commission that was set up, the university were part of shaping what divestment meant in the Durham context.

Please share your divestment story - for example, when the campaign

started & when & what your first action was.

Spring 2015: the campaign at Durham begins

Autumn 2015: following a request from the People & Planet Society ('P&P'), the relatively new & sympathetic Vice-Chancellor ('VC') meets with two members to discuss divestment. The group asks what would it take to persuade the university to divest. The university are less interested in the technical aspects and mainly want to see that there is sufficient support from the student body. They say that if campaigners manage to get enough Durham Colleges ('JCR's) on board then the University will consider it.

Following this meeting, P&P raise divestment from fossil fuels with the students' union by getting a motion passed at the SU Assembly. P&P also manage to get 14 JCRs supporting divestment through signing onto a joint letter.

Throughout this time, and going forward until a commitment is made, P&P gather signatures for the petition they have set up for Durham to divest, have a variety of artsy creative actions on campus - which prove great for recruitment - and link up with supportive academics - some of whom make a video.

Start of 2016: following the clear indication of student support Durham's Divestment Commission is established.

A Pro-Vice Chancellor is assigned to lead the body, which consists of: four university managers (including the Director of Finance and Head of Governance); two student members (a member of P&P and the SU President) and five people from across the academic faculties of the institution. The latter were incredibly important in terms of ensuring that academics felt safe in the knowledge that their research

wouldn't be impacted by a divestment commitment. *

Summer 2016: first commission meeting takes place. This is spent defining the parameters, which P&P provide the research and information for. The SU President supports.

Autumn 2016: Divestment Commission puts out a student, staff and alumni consultation.

Two main questions are asked:

1. Do you support divestment?
2. Do you support divestment from fossil fuel companies that also have renewable investments? E.g. a business model based on 50-50 fossil fuel & renewable development

P&P do lots of work on campus and online to get people filling out the consultation. The SU support through their various communication platforms.

800 overwhelmingly positive responses are received. Even on question 2 - folk support divestment from companies with any fossil fuel link. Submissions are also taken from the Finance Committee, who are broadly supportive of Durham divesting.

Summer 2017: Final meeting of Commission takes place and a report is drafted. This report is then sent to the university's executive committee, who agree with the proposal to divest from all fossil fuels.

Winter 2017: this recommendation goes to Senate and Ethics Committee and is approved - Ethics Committee already have responsibility for Durham's Ethical Investment Policy which excludes tobacco and arms. The proposal is then approved by Finance Sub-Committee, and following their agreement, it is passed to the major decision-making body: University Council who give it the final stamp of approval. However, it isn't until SU President Megan challenges the university in a governance meeting to make a public commitment that they agree to.

March 2018: Durham make a public commitment that they will divest from all fossil fuels and become a major international partner in the development of green energy.

Going forward: Whilst the announcement is shared before the embargo is lifted, the rationale for holding back on announcing remains to be followed through with: ensuring the local community are fully briefed as to why this decision has been taken. Megan feels this is especially important in Durham due to the town's position as an ex-mining community.

What tactics did you use to win on divestment, and which ones do you feel were most effective?

We used a variety of tactics including:

- The setting up of the Commission. Getting this established with both student and officer representation secured was fundamental to achieving divestment
- Getting JCRs supporting was important, because not only did this mean that we had extra support from other recognised stakeholders within the university structure, but it allowed us to mobilise student support
- A professional approach was taken – there were no rowdy and disruptive protests, but constructive conversations with the university who were engaged and supportive of exploring it as a concept and what it might mean in reality

What role(s) did the student group play in this campaign?

Drive and focus was the overall role of the student group (P&P). We did a lot of lobbying the SU and the university, conducted the research that provided all the information about divestment for the Commission and set the direction of the campaign. Importantly, the campaign was mostly student directed and student-led. We didn't engage with the SU about it until start of 2016 and it was us who

first initiated contact with the university about it.

What role(s) did the Students' Union play in this campaign?

Following divestment being passed through the SU assembly, us student union officers had a mandate to progress the campaign within our roles as representatives of the student voice. We spoke in support of divestment at university council, had ongoing conversations with the VC and university management executive, and used our positions on committees to open-up divestment dialogue wherever possible. We were able to use the strength and weight of the students' union within the institutional structure to advance the demands of the student group.

How did you work together? Were there any areas of cohesion and/or contention? If there was contention how did you overcome this?

Both the student group and the students' union worked well together. The presence of both of us on the commission made the most difference as the SU representative wasn't the lone student voice – as they are on many other boards and committees - but unified with another on the board. A students' union staff member also supported the student group from a policy perspective.

The SU really helped as they knew how to navigate the university's bureaucracy and knew how to frame arguments in a way that the university would have to meaningfully engage with. They met us before Divestment Commission meetings for preparation, and after for debriefs. These were useful for both knowing what we wanted to get out of Divestment Commission meetings and for learning other details, such as who does what in the institution and who makes the final decision. The SU were also supremely useful for providing insight & reassurance that we were doing the right things. They supported P&P to keep us hitting our established targets.

If you could give three pieces of advice to other fossil fuel divestment and reinvestment campaigners what would they be?

1. **Have targets that are worthwhile,** based on asking people what they want you to do – like P&P did with the VC. If people don't agree with your aims, ask what it would take for them to change their mind. The chat we had with the VC in 2015 set the entire campaign for the year by providing a structure to our campaign strategy. To create this, we considered: who needs convincing? Who do we need to talk to do that? What tactics can we use to make it an institutional priority? We had focus weeks - a 'contact academics' week, a 'get the petition going' week etc... having these targets that you know are important bring you ever closer to victory
2. **Don't get bogged down in cynicism** but mobilise and get mass student backing – inform the student body and be clear about what your demands mean
3. **Use your voice.** It is YOUR university. Try to speak with the university in the first instance and then escalate if that proves to be ineffective. Be diplomatic so that if this avenue is exhausted you can justify taking radical action. For us, we were lucky that the university's Commission actually led to meaningful engagement, rather than them using it as a way to slow the campaign down

Following this victory, what will you be focusing on as campaigners?

There are two main campaigns we will be focusing on:

1. **Mitie Must Fall** – ending our university's contract with a company which also runs detention centres. As this contract won't be negotiated for another three to four years we are exploring how to embed human rights

into the procurement policy as part of effecting this change. This will also lay the groundwork for the university to be better in their procurement activities more generally.

2. **Divest Barclays** – pressuring one of the world’s largest fossil fuel investors to ditch their fossil finance. The first part of this will focus on achieving a commitment from them to stop financing any new fossil fuel infrastructure. We will be pushing for our university and students’ union to refuse to bank with Barclays too.

We will also be progressing our partnership - which came out of our success on divestment - with the Durham Energy Institute. We are hoping to work together to achieve progress on environmental issues.

*The Commission went very in depth with their exploration of what divestment might mean for Durham. They spoke with research funders and partners: research was found not to be at risk, and any risk that was found was negligible. Furthermore, as Dong energy had revolutionised their business model, transitioning from being a fossil fuel company to a renewables-based entity, Durham felt that it was definitely possible as a Higher Education institution

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