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## **New report looks at the influence of the fossil fuel sector on university research funding and priorities**

As the Alberta government launches its *Alberta 2030* review of the post-secondary education system, a new report from the Corporate Mapping Project and the Parkland Institute raises big questions related to universities' fulfillment of their public interest mandate. Authored by Laurie Adkin, a political economist at the University of Alberta, *Knowledge for an Ecologically Sustainable Future? Innovation Policy and Alberta Universities* examines the implications of the research funding priorities of the federal and provincial governments for the production of the knowledge needed for an ecologically sustainable economy and society.

The report traces funding from multiple governmental and corporate sources over a period of twenty years to document which areas of energy and environmental research have been prioritized in Alberta's leading research universities. The data confirm the heavy weighting of this investment toward fossil-fuels-related research and technology development (R&D) centred in the faculties of engineering. Areas of research such as renewable energies, energy efficiency and conservation, social planning, and sustainable agriculture, among others, have been comparatively underfunded. This pattern is found in relation not only to grant funding, but also in the establishment of research chairs and institutes.

Other studies of universities that are imbedded in carbon-extractive economies have found that corporations directly and indirectly invested in the fossil fuel sectors wield significant influence over the universities' research priorities. They do this through their extensive presence on university boards and the boards of centres and institutes, as well as their corporate brands on buildings, labs, schools, and scholarship funds. While these relationships operate at the universities of Alberta and Calgary, Adkin argues that a nexus of government and corporate decision-makers influence decision-making at the level of the innovation agencies themselves. University administrators also play a role in shaping the priorities of the funding agencies.

Among the report's findings are that, from 1999 to 2016, 63 per cent of Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) funding for energy research at the two universities has gone to fossil-fuels-related R&D, and only 11 per cent to renewables, energy efficiency & conservation, fuel cells, and biofuels combined. Canada Foundation for Innovation funding for energy projects has favoured fossil fuels R&D over the other categories of energy research by a ratio of 4:1. Provincial agencies have allocated about \$6.4 billion to fossil-fuels-related research since 1997, with almost two-thirds of this taking the form of royalty credits or grants to corporations. In contrast, the amount invested in alternative energies and energy efficiency R&D add up to only 4 per cent of the amount invested in fossil-fuels-related R&D, and the investment in environmental research and climate science adds up to only 3 per cent. Investment in sustainable agriculture—from any agency—is negligible.

Adkin argues that the sustainable development discourse embraced by many politicians and university administrators seeks to reconcile the extraction of fossil fuels with climate change science by promising more clean and efficient technologies for extraction and upgrading. In lieu of prioritizing the production of knowledge and technologies needed for an ecologically sustainable, post-carbon future, our universities are helping to prolong the fossil era.

Adkin concludes by asserting that universities should provide a leadership role in cultivating and advancing the knowledge needed for social, ecological, and economic change. Albertans and Canadians need their universities to help develop sustainable food production, water management, renewable energy, sustainable materials, high quality social services, democratic planning, reconciliation with First Nations, and other dimensions of a good life in a carbon-constrained world.

The report points out that such a mandate is not just a concern for disciplines in the sciences and engineering, but that the scope of transition required means that funding agencies should be encouraging the building of interdisciplinary bridges and adopting a far more holistic understanding of “innovation” that includes social, cultural, and political—as well as technological—knowledge. Adkin says: “We should be thinking about innovation in terms of decarbonization, decolonization, and democratization.”

“The conflicts identified in the report are highlighted by the Alberta government’s assertion that the post-secondary education system needs to emphasize the skills and competencies required in *today’s* economy and job market,” says Adkin. “This would mean continuing to privilege skills and competencies related to the extractive industries. We should instead be thinking about the *future* Alberta—one that can provide sustainable and diverse livelihoods and a high quality of life within ecological limits. Building *this* future will require vocal and principled leadership on the part of academics and university administrators.”

Parkland Institute is a non-partisan public policy research institute in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Alberta. *Knowledge for an Ecologically Sustainable Future? Innovation Policy and Alberta Universities* is available for [download on Parkland Institute’s website](#).

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