

13 June 2007

Media release

Contact: Clive Hamilton (02) 6162 4140 or 0413 993 223
Christian Downie (02) 6162 4140 or 0419 014 575

Fossil Fuel Dollars Threaten Universities’ Independence

Generous endowments to Australian universities by the fossil fuel lobby could be a double-edged sword according to a new paper from the Australia Institute.

Entitled *University Capture*, the paper by Institute Executive Director Dr Clive Hamilton and Research Fellow Christian Downie explores the increasing involvement of powerful fossil fuel companies in Australian universities.

“In recent years, concerns have been raised about the effects of commercialisation of Australian universities on academic freedom,” Dr Hamilton said today. “The threat is that by sponsoring departments, schools, centres, chairs and academic posts, the fossil fuel industries could gain a stranglehold over the teaching and research priorities of universities.

“Very large sums from the fossil fuel industries are involved. The Australian Coal Association Research Program, for example, has allocated \$145 million to 929 different projects since 1992. Companies such as BHP Billiton, Rio Tinto and Woodside Petroleum also sponsor numerous university chairs and academic posts.”

The paper details the close relationships between fossil fuel industries and the University of Queensland, the University of Western Australia and Curtin University of Technology. It argues that universities need clearer ethical guidelines and better disclosure practices to insulate them and their staff from the commercial pressures and conflicts that can arise from financial relationships with industry.

The paper quotes a British report that found universities are “encouraging oil companies to steer the research agenda, tailoring courses to meet corporate personnel demands and awarding high profile positions to oil executives in return for corporate sponsorship and contracts.”

“There have already been individual cases within Australian universities that show the same dangers to academic freedoms,” Dr Hamilton said. “We need structures that ensure Australia’s enviable academic independence is never compromised by commercial interests”.

www.tai.org.au