Open Letter Template and Guide

There are a number of things to consider before initiating the open letter process. There is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way to doing an open letter, but it is important your team has a clear understanding of how you will carry out the tactic before starting.

**Signatories.** Whose signatures are you collecting? Students, academics, alumni? If you are collecting academic signatures, will you just collect professors and associate professors, or will you broaden it out? The university is a hierarchical place, meaning you might like to choose quality over quantity.

**Signatures.** Will you accept electronic signatures or will you collect handwritten signatures? Will you collect the signatures individually or on a form?

Electronic pros: fast, easy to spread.
Handwritten pros: more chance to converse with academics and pass on any campaign materials, handwritten may carry more weight. Cons: harder to spread and slower to collect.

**Updates, additions, changes.** How will you deal with wording changes suggested by signatories, or new information that you want to add? At all times you need to maintain trust with your signatories-if changes are made, they should be informed.

A good way to go about this is to highlight, at the time that they sign on, that you may add new divestment commitments or other relevant news in the event that it arises before the letter is delivered. This means you do not have to notify them every time you add something in.

**Targets and Timeframes.** Before running your open letter, be sure to set a target number of signatures by a certain time. This should be realistic but ambitious and meaningful. For example, 20 signatures is not likely to have much of an effect, even if it is all your 1 person team seems capable of doing! If this is the case, you might like to reconsider the tactic or try and recruit others to help you out.

Communicate your target and timeframe with signatories so they have a sense of urgency and understand where you are headed. This will encourage them to seek signatures themselves.

**Tracking.** If you are collecting academic signatures, or signatures of well-known alumni, it is crucial that you keep track of who you have contacted. This will avoid embarrassing double-ups and give you a good sense of the spread of your outreach. Consider making a spreadsheet to log all of your interactions with academics, with different tabs for each faculty/department.

**Disclosure.** There are three options for disclosure:
1. Publish the names of signatories as you collect them
2. Publish the names on the day of the delivery, try and get media
3. Deliver the letter to your decision-makers without publishing the names

The advantage of option #2 is that you create suspense and excitement around the unveiling of the names. Plus, some signatories may well want to remain unnamed until others have also been named.
You may choose option #3 if you are in the middle of sensitive negotiations with your university, for example. Most of the time though you want to publicise the support you garner for the campaign as widely as possible.

**Delivery.** How will you deliver the open letter? Will it be mailed, e-mailed, tabled at a Council/Senate meeting, delivered in ‘giant’ form to the Vice-Chancellor’s office?

Whatever you do, you want your supporters and the broader public to know about it. Getting a high number of signatories is no small feat and is worth publicising and celebrating widely. Doing so will put more pressure on your decision-maker than a quiet delivery.

**TEMPLATE**

An open letter to [insert name of university] from members of its community:

In full awareness of the urgent need to act on climate change, we, the undersigned, call on the University to:

1. Investigate and disclose its investments in companies whose primary business is the exploration, extraction, processing and transportation of fossil fuels;
2. Cease any new investments in these companies;
3. Cease its investments in the fossil fuel sector within 5 years and regularly report back on progress.

Climate change is not simply an economic and environmental problem, but an issue of social justice, intergenerational equity, and the viability of future human endeavours. Our sense of urgency in signing this letter cannot be overstated. As members of the academic community of [insert name of university], we believe that it is our moral responsibility to show leadership in combating the global threat of climate change in order to ensure a liveable future for ourselves and all species, and for generations to come.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the International Energy Agency (IEA), the World Bank and other reputable authorities all warn of a four degree Celsius rise in average global temperatures by 2100 if greenhouse gas emissions continue to increase at their current rate. Recent experience of weather extremes and natural disasters here and across the world is only the beginning of a new and more volatile climate regime.

Despite its small population, Australia is a major contributor to climate change. It is the largest per capita emitter of greenhouse gases globally and among the world’s 20 top aggregate emitters based on its domestic emissions alone. Australia is also the world’s second largest exporter of coal and, if
the emissions embodied in its coal exports are taken into account, Australia is the world’s sixth largest direct and indirect emitter of carbon dioxide.

In order to be part of the solution to the threat of global warming, we must diminish our domestic reliance on fossil fuels and replace them with clean, renewable sources of energy. We must also wind back our coal exports. We now know that fossil fuels cause climate change of unprecedented destructive potential. We also know that many in this industry spend large sums of money to mislead the public, deny climate science, control legislation and regulation, and suppress alternative energy sources.

By divesting from its financial involvement in fossil fuel production and export, [insert name of university] will send a strong leadership message to the wider community that the time of fossil fuel reliance must come to an end.

In addition to the moral imperative for fossil fuel divestment, there are strong financial reasons for such a move. Financial analysts and international organisations such as the World Bank recognise that fossil fuel assets now bear material and growing financial risks. Climate policies intended to keep global warming below 2 degrees Celsius, coupled with increasingly affordable renewable energy technologies and socio-political pressure to keep fossil fuels in the ground will mean that our reliance on fossil fuels as an energy source will diminish rapidly in the future. Fossil fuel resources and associated technologies face a recognised risk of becoming stranded assets. Moving away from fossil fuels is not only an ethical choice but also a smart business move.

Recent pronouncements from authoritative quarters support our call for action. Christiana Figueres, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) states that the “continued and dangerous rise in greenhouse gases . . . is in large part the direct result of past investments in . . . fossil fuels.” She warns that “institutional investors who ignore climate risk face being increasingly seen as blatantly in breach of their fiduciary duty.” (January 15, 2014)

The University [insert details of University’s sustainability commitments, eg. Tailores Declaration, Universitas 21 Statement on Sustainability or any other sustainability commitments they are signed onto or have made independently]. Honouring these commitments is central to maintaining the University’s integrity and reputation as a credible institution and leader in its field.
We request that [insert name of university] shows courage, applies prudent risk management and acts as a progressive leader on the Australian and global stage in the area of climate change abatement. We ask that the University divests its direct and indirect investments in fossil fuel assets. By doing so, [insert name of university] will be joining a growing number of higher educational institutions that have already committed to divest from fossil fuels.

Signed,

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Signature                  Print name                  Date

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Print title

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Signature                  Print name                  Date

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