

Oxford UCU Branch Motion

Passed at Branch Extraordinary General Meeting on 28th July 2026

Motion entitled “Sustainability and Gen-AI”

This branch notes:

- The University of Oxford Sustainability strategy targets net zero carbon and biodiversity net gain by 2035

- Generative AI (Gen-AI) involves significantly greater energy and water use than classical computing (e.g. Google saw its electricity usage increase by 37% between 2024 and 2025), which will necessarily impact climate and ecosystems. But reports into these impacts are often murky. For example, Google reported a 2% drop in overall operational emissions 2024-2025, but when total emissions were quantified, (Scope 1, 2 and 3, including supply chain) Google reported an 18% increase:

<https://sustainability.google/reports/google-2026-environmental-report/>

- Projected energy use growth from Gen-AI suggests these impacts will only increase if AI follows the growth path laid out by companies

- The University and College Union National Principles for the use of Artificial Intelligence (point 10) notes: ‘Procurement of AI tools must be justified, transparent and guided by ethical standards which prioritise open access, data protection, and public good. It should also align with sustainability commitments demonstrated by conducting an environmental impact assessment.’

https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/15656/Principles-for-use-of-artificial-intelligence/pdf/UCU_AI_principles_March_26.pdf

This branch believes:

- The race for Gen-AI rollout cannot come at the expense of environmental and climate change commitments

- An uncritical approach to Gen-AI rollout risks compromising these commitments

- The guidance currently provided by the university does not reflect a rigorous approach to quantifying real-world, present impacts, relying instead on claims by interested technology companies and speculative future decarbonisation

- The difficulty involved with quantifying the carbon footprint of Gen-AI use is not an excuse to ignore the problem, but rather makes it even more necessary

- As a public research institution, the University of Oxford has a duty to model a responsible approach to energy-intensive Gen-AI usage

This branch resolves:

● To lobby the university via formal and informal channels to:

○ Include emissions from Gen-AI within Scope 3 reporting (they have said they will do this but may require pressure to follow-through)

○ Conduct an environmental impact assessment in advance of any further institution-wide contracts with Gen-AI providers

○ Account for Gen-AI use within research as part of its Sustainable Labs programme

○ Seek providers which produce the least environmental impact when making contracting decisions

● Request data from the university (via FOI or TU rights) on relevant statistics relating the usage of Gen-AI to environmental impacts, where available, examples could be: the total number of tokens used by the whole university as part of its ChatGPT and Codex licences, any existing emissions quantification