



Memo

Date

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Contact person

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Subject

Initial Recommendations on the supplemental Framework for International Collaborations

SUMMARY

In its initial reflections on a supplemental framework for international collaborations, the ad-hoc working group offers the Executive Board and Board of Deans a set of concrete recommendations on ingredients and process steps for extending the current Policy Framework for Cooperation with Third Parties. Key recommendations include the need for supplementing the existing Framework with educational collaborations, existing collaborations and different levels of collaborations, which however each bring their own specific connotations. For instance, assessing existing collaborations should only be considered in the gravest of circumstances and educational collaborations should be assessed on their specific merits. The working group further provides a set of ingredients to be taken into account in supplementing the framework. Given the complexity of the issue and the importance of a careful process leading to a workable and sustainable framework for the UvA, the ad-hoc working group advises the Executive Board and Board of Deans to continue the process for developing a supplemental framework after the summer break. Additionally, the ad-hoc working group urges them to invest adequate resources in the next steps of this process and in the future implementation of the (supplemented) Framework.

1. INTRODUCTION

This document constitutes initial recommendations by the ad hoc working group to the Executive Board and Board of Deans on a supplement to the University of Amsterdam's [Policy Framework for Cooperation with Third Parties](#). The working group adopted this document on the basis of consensus within the working group. In 2022 the University of Amsterdam (UvA) developed a Policy Framework for Cooperation with Third Parties (hereinafter: the Framework). This Framework caters for advice on decision-making on new research collaborations with organisations (universities, private partners, and non-profit organisations) based in other countries. At the same time an Advisory Committee for Cooperation with Third Parties was established (the Committee).

In 2023, in response to the global climate emergency, the UvA decided it will no longer collaborate with companies from the fossil fuel industry, unless a set of strict criteria are met. For this purpose, the framework was extended with [stricter rules](#) for collaboration with the fossil industry.

Events surrounding the catastrophic humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the UvA's response to the war sparked anew the discussion about the University's collaboration with third parties. The UvA academic community is divided on whether and how the UvA should respond in the context of collaborations with partners in countries or regions in war or violent conflict or where gross and systemic human rights violations take place. Against this backdrop, it has become clear that the current Framework does not fully cater for decision-making on a number of important issues in international collaborations, namely:

- the Framework does not include criteria for assessing collaboration in education (e.g., student exchanges).
- the Framework only applies to assessment of new collaborations; a process for assessing existing collaborations is lacking.
- the Framework only looks at projects, not at institutions, centres or consortia.

Furthermore, the framework foresees in an assessment on ethical considerations in initiating new research collaborations with so-called “controversial” partners or countries. The framework, however, does not address the third parties’ context in case a country or region where the third party is based is involved in war or violent conflict or where gross and systematic violations of human rights take place.

The Executive Board and Deans therefore decided to task an ad-hoc working group to advise on whether the Framework needs to be supplemented with additional assessment criteria and process steps. It is important to note here that the Executive Board and Board of Deans decided that the supplement to the framework must be applicable to different international collaborations and not solely focus on providing an assessment tool for advising on the UvA position on the war in Gaza. As such, this advice is not intended to solve in the short term the issue of collaboration with Israeli institutions.

The document is structured as follows. Section 2 contains a description of the mandate of the working group, followed by section 3 on a recap of the process to date. Sections 4 and 5 include the key questions that were used to consult the UvA community, as well as a summary of the responses. Finally, sections 6 and 7 set out the recommendations of the working group on further developing a supplemental framework, and its overall conclusions on the process and potential follow-up actions.

2. MANDATE AND ENVISAGED OUTPUT OF THE WORKING GROUP

The ad-hoc working group comprised [experts](#) from different academic backgrounds and expertise, based at different faculties across the UvA. The mandate of the ad hoc working group was to advise on possible supplements to the existing Framework, based on the gathering and elaboration of ideas, dilemma's, concerns and possible directions from the UvA community. Key resources for feeding into these ideas and directions were the Faculty Roundtable sessions, the Hybrid Town Hall meeting, which were held in June 2024 and the intranet consultation via DenkMee.uva.nl organised in the first week of July 2024. The working group was not tasked with providing advice on boycotts of any sorts of countries, regions or individuals.

3. RECAP OF PROCESS TO DATE

- In its initial stages, the working group drafted a process and agenda for a series of roundtable meetings at the seven UvA faculties. In addition, at the initiative of the working group, a Hybrid Town Hall event was organised to enable a wider representation of the UvA community to engage in the discussions on the supplemental framework. In order to ensure impartiality in leading the discussions, an external moderator was sought to moderate the sessions.
- Representatives from all seven faculties were extensively consulted during this series of roundtables, which were held between 10 and 19 June. Participants to the sessions included students, academic staff and professional support staff based at the different faculties. Each faculty was responsible for the process of inviting a balanced group of representatives from the faculty concerned. In total, more than 160 participants took part. A rotating delegation from the working group attended all seven roundtable sessions.
- On 24 June the Hybrid Town Hall event was organised, bringing together over 80 participants from across the university. A number of working group members participated in the event.
- In parallel to the roundtable series, the executive secretaries of the working group conducted informal consultations with representatives of the UvA StudentServices department, as well as representatives of the participatory decision-making bodies (medezeggenschap) of students and staff.
- From 1 through 5 July an intranet consultation on the working group's initial recommendations was organised via DenkMee.uva.nl, to seek feedback and input from all UvA students and staff. In this consultation, the working group invited the entire UvA academic community to respond to these draft recommendations. More than 130 staff and students responded via DenkMee. The feedback and input collected via DenkMee has been considered in finalising the working group's advice to the Executive Board and Board of Deans in July 2024.
- On 8 July the working group submitted its recommendations to the Executive Board for a supplemental framework for international collaborations, for deliberation by the Executive Board during its meeting on 9 July.
- On 11 July a delegation of the working group is invited to the joint meeting of the Executive Board and Board of Deans to discuss the advice and recommendations.

4. KEY QUESTIONS

Bearing in mind the combination of a sense of urgency and the need to maintain a sufficient level of care, quality and impact, the ad-hoc working group adopted the following approach. The ad-hoc working group defined a set of two overarching key questions, which were broken down in a number of premises or dilemmas for discussion and reflection. The overarching questions are:

Key question 1

What is the role of the university in providing guidance for international collaborations and where do you see room for improvement of the current Framework?

Break-down of premises and questions:

- Should collaborations in education (and other core tasks) be included in the supplement to the Framework?
- Which levels of collaboration should be included in the Framework? (Institutional, externally funded research projects, individual collaborations, other?)
- Should we differentiate between these levels in the assessment?
- Should the Framework include indicators that could trigger reassessment of existing collaborations (not only new ones)?
- Is the emergence or existence of an armed conflict an example of such an indicator because of an increased risk for human rights violations?
- Are “gross and systematic violations of human rights” an example of such an indicator and if so, how should this be defined?
- Could we look at deploying existing European Frameworks for due diligence on human rights?

Key question 2

What are the key ethical and moral considerations in establishing and maintaining international collaborations?

Break-down of premises and questions:

- Should the university primarily assess the academic merit of the partner organisation, not the context, even if gross and systematic violations of human rights or international crimes may take place in the country/region?
- Are the institution leadership and governance sufficiently autonomous?
- To what extent is the institution/faculty actively involved in unethical research?
- Is the institution upholding academic freedom and scientific integrity?
- Can we differentiate between different organisational units (say, faculties) of an institution and/or between different activities (research/student-exchange etc.)? if some parts of the university do not meet our collaboration criteria, can we still work with other units of the same institution?
- What are trusted sources the university can use to assess the country and partner institution?

5. SUMMARY OF INPUT RECEIVED FROM THE UvA COMMUNITY

The roundtable sessions, Hybrid Town hall discussions were fruitful and rich, while at the same time testimony to the variety and breadth of perspectives and emotions that are present amongst the UvA students and employees on the topic of international collaborations and, more specifically, the conflict in Gaza. The results from the intranet consultation on DenkMee showed a very similar picture. Several dozens of comments were made on the necessity to cut ties, or freeze collaborations with institutions in Israel, prior to decision-making on the adoption of a supplemental framework on international collaborations. On the other hand, there was just as much input arguing the contrary, namely that severing connections with partners in Israel is not a solution. The dialogue in recent weeks makes it clear that it is difficult to consider the possible expansion of the Framework in isolation from the current situation. Given that this particular issue falls beyond the scope of the working group's mandate, these comments could not directly be integrated into the set of recommendations. That said, the working group decided to include mention of these inputs in an annex to this document.

While many different viewpoints were expressed by students and staff of different faculties, the ad-hoc working group feels that there is sufficient consensus across the UvA community on the need to supplement the existing Framework. However, the scope of the supplement needs to be carefully defined, while allowing and encouraging ethical reasoning by individual academics based on the framework criteria. The development of a sufficiently comprehensive, but at the same time practicable and sustainable supplemental set of assessment criteria needs to be done carefully and would therefore require more time after the summer break. These key conclusions form the backbone of the draft recommendations listed below.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS: KEY INGREDIENTS FOR EXTENDING THE FRAMEWORK

Based on consultations and input from the processes described above and on deliberations in the ad-hoc working group, the ad-hoc working group offers the following recommendations to the Executive Board and Board of Deans.

- 1) The working group concludes that there is sufficient support for the notion that, academic freedom and academic responsibility go hand in hand. Therefore, the Framework must be supplemented with additional assessment criteria for other core tasks of the university alongside research, as well as a clear set of indicators to determine if and when the university should start (re)assessing existing collaborations.
- 2) New and existing collaborations should be assessed on the basis of the same standards. Given that the current Framework only caters for new collaborations, the supplemented framework should include indicators that could call for (re)assessment of existing collaborations in exceptional political circumstances, such as ongoing and emerging wars or conflicts involving war crimes or crimes against humanity, or the perpetration of gross and systematic violations of human rights in a country or area where a partner organization is based. Additionally, indicators to assess the potential involvement of a partner in war crimes or gross and systematic human rights violations should be developed. These indicators should be practicable and provide transparency and contribute to the university's ability of being a reliable partner.
- 3) As a general principle, assessing ongoing collaborations should only be considered in the gravest of circumstances, taking into consideration contractual obligations and the impact on the relationships with partners and funding organisations. Termination should only take place under conditions which do not prejudice the rights and interests of bona fide third parties and taking into consideration harm to partners and funding organisations.
- 4) The supplemented Framework should define criteria for "trusted sources" (e.g., objective and reliable information and/or advice from official international organisations, such as the UN or the EU or international courts) to rely on for assessments of institutional or project-based international collaborations. In addition, country- and region-specific expertise available at the university itself could be consulted.
- 5) In addition to a set of overarching criteria, the Framework should be extended with additional sub-sets of criteria for specific core areas, such as education, and patient care.
- 6) Alongside the project-to-project level assessment, which is currently in place, collaborations with organisations in exceptional political circumstances (based on the set of indicators mentioned under point 2) should receive extra scrutiny. For this purpose, a risk assessment framework should be developed for these types of "higher risk" collaborations and included in the supplemental framework, allowing for a nuanced and detailed evaluation of the (envisaged) collaboration and the third party (or parties) involved.
- 7) While the UvA should set its own ethical standards and provide its own interpretation of "academic responsibility", (inter)national coordination and if possible, alignment should be pursued. The Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity is a successful example of such a joint national ethical framework.

- 8) It is advisable to leave room for differentiation between different organizational units (e.g., faculties) of an institution on the one hand, and an entire institution on the other hand, in this risk assessment framework, which will be integrated into the supplemental framework.
- 9) The supplemented framework should include clear process steps and possible scenarios on the consequences of (temporary) suspensions of collaborations. Moreover, the Framework should be practicable, and for this a robust process and division of labour must be specified.
- 10) In addition to the supplemented framework, an “explainer” must be developed, outlining the types of collaborations (institutional, project-based etc.) as well as the relevant mandates and responsibilities for decision-making for each type of collaboration.
- 11) The working group recommends continuing the process for developing a supplemental framework after the summer break, as this important exercise will require continued efforts to ensure a practicable, robust framework and procedures will be specified. This continued process will require both an allocation of adequate resources as well as a clear process of connecting this work to other existing UvA-wide advisory committees and platforms.

7. CONCLUSION: SUM-UP OF ADVICE AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER PROCESS

In summary, the ad-hoc working group concludes that there is sufficient consensus amongst the UvA academic community on the need to supplement the existing Policy Framework for Collaboration with Third Parties. That said, the working group would like to emphasize that the scope of the supplement needs to be more carefully defined based on the (supplemented) framework criteria, while allowing and encouraging ethical reasoning by individual academics based on the framework criteria.

Over and above that the working group notes that even if a more robust framework would be in place, the outcome of assessments of specific cases will always involve an ethical and substantive weighting of facts and contextual information, leading to various perspectives for action (handelingsperspectieven). The concrete outcome of future assessments and advice of the Committee, may therefore vary from case to case.

Therefore, the working group decided to offer a set of eleven recommendations at this stage, which could serve as building blocks for a continued process for developing a supplemental framework after the summer break. It is essential that the UvA delivers a practicable and sustainable framework, on which there is wide consensus, therefore this exercise will require continued efforts in the new academic year. Given that the ad-hoc working group's mandate will conclude at the start of the summer break, the Executive Board and Board of Deans need to decide who will continue this ongoing process (this or another working group or consider a hand over to the existing advisory committee).

The Executive Board and Board of Deans must consider investing adequate resources in the next steps of this process and in the implementation of the (supplemented) Framework, including manpower and expertise, taking all eleven recommendations into consideration. In the next phase consideration should be given to alignment of the supplemented framework with the national, European and global context, mainly to get inspiration for enhancing the UvA framework.

Finally, the working group recommends that a process will be developed that will include a connection of the work of a working group and/or (enlarged) committee with existing UvA-wide platforms, such as the faculty-base ethical committees, the Committee for Education (UCO), Committee for Research (UOC), and participatory decision-making bodies (medezeggenschap), including representatives from student organisations etc., so as to ensure proper embedding into other relevant UvA-wide policies and guidelines and avoid overlapping mandates.

ANNEX: SUMMARY OF INPUT COLLECTED VIA DENKMEE

As indicated in section 5, several dozens of comments were made arguing to cut ties, or freeze collaborations with institutions in Israel, prior to decision-making on the adoption of a supplemental framework on international collaborations. At the same time, there were also many comments arguing the contrary, namely that severing connections with partners in Israel is not a solution. A question, which was raised by many, is the comparison to the situation after the invasion of Russia in Ukraine, which resulted in sanctions, and hence a temporary suspension of institutional collaborations with Russian and Belarusian institutions. It should be noted that the key difference between these situations is that in the case of the war in Ukraine, both the EU as well as the government of the Netherlands, decided to impose sanctions on Russia and Belarus, within less than a month after the start of the war.

Specific suggestions concerning the working group's recommendations, which will be more closely considered during the next phase of the process, included the following:

- Opinions on the timeframe are diverging; a number of comments suggested that the UvA should not wait until after the summer break in continuing the process but keep the process going during the summer months. Other voices suggested that ample time and consideration are a prerequisite for developing a sustainable framework.
- There seemed to be support for the proposal to supplement the Framework by including a process for reassessing existing collaborations, but opinions how this process should be organised varied. Some comments suggested that this should be done periodically for all collaborations, rather than restricting this to cases that would match with the defined process and indicators. A number of comments included a plea for simplicity of procedures and avoiding time consuming processes. Further comments warned that financial interests should not be a factor in deciding on (dis)continuation of collaborations.
- Transparency on the portfolio of ongoing collaborations is needed, according to quite a number of comments.
- Quite some comments requested more clarity on decision-making procedures and mandates. Some even suggested that the advice of the advisory committee should be binding. Furthermore, questions were asked about the division of labour within the university: should ethical committees be organised at the university-wide level or faculty level or otherwise? Also, a number of comments made a plea for democratic processes involving engagement of students and employees in the procedures.
- Many participants in the DenkMee consultation flagged the need to specify the (working) definition of 'academic responsibility'.
- Similarly, a number of participants indicated that the specification of 'trusted sources' is a key issue. At the same time, some comments warned the university not to rely solely on governmental decisions, as the university's own ethical and moral standards should be leading. Additionally, the usefulness of defining thresholds was explored, again while questioning what sources to rely on in doing so (UN, NGO's, government?).
- Opinions on whether or not to differentiate, either between types of collaborations (e.g., education/research) or within institutions, varied and points were made to the risk of fragmentation.

- Some comments noted the need to define a process for resuming collaborations after a temporary suspension.
- The possibility to invite academics themselves to reflect on potential harm their research might inflict on others, also in the context of the climate emergency was welcomed by some participants.