

# Report second dialogue session ethical action framework, 14 October 2024

## Department

Office of the Board

## Date

5 november 2024

On Monday 14 October, students, lecturers and staff of The Hague University of Applied Sciences (THUAS), led by Andrew Makkinga, talked to each other for a second time about ethical considerations in assessing external collaborations. The aim of this second dialogue session was to look from different perspectives on how the assessment of entering into external collaborations currently takes place and how it is perceived by the THUAS community. Using practical examples from the experience of our university, the participants discussed all the steps of the decision-making process. This helped to clarify which considerations are currently leading when entering into external collaborations and monitoring existing ones.

After providing insight into the current decision-making process, those present reflected on the focal points and discussion points that are important for having constructive conversations about ethical considerations in collaborations within THUAS and beyond. The ethical framework for action was drawn up for this purpose. Professor of Philosophy and Professional Practice Chris Detweiler commented: "It seems tempting to have a ready-made set of rules for making decisions. That way, you put the ethical considerations outside yourself and outsource them to a decision tree. Although the conversations can sometimes be uncomfortable because of the diverse perspectives, they are often actually fascinating. You are forced to clarify your own views and acknowledge those of others. You also have to realise that consensus is not always achievable. Doubt in this regard can be a signal that something of importance is at play, which calls for further investigation."

### **How do collaborations come about?**

Participants acknowledged that The Hague University of Applied Sciences currently collaborates with external partners in various ways, both formally through long-term contracts and informally through guest lectures and temporary projects. Formal collaborations are often documented and signed by the Executive Board or a director, while informal collaborations remain flexible and require less documentation. Decision-making on these collaborations varies by level; major collaborations are assessed at board level, while subject-specific projects are the responsibility of lecturers and researchers. To enter into a collaboration, partners must commit to The Hague University of Applied Sciences' mission and principles. This focuses on educating world citizens with social impact, and partners must contribute to the development of students and staff in line with the institution's social responsibility. Strategic and important collaborations are evaluated after completion to check whether they are still in line with the goals of The Hague University of Applied Sciences and whether partners adhere to the agreed standards and values.

### **Which criteria should an assessment framework for collaborations meet?**

Participants advocated a proactive approach, clarifying the existing assessment framework, which already considers ethical and legal aspects. The complexity of assessing collaborations was however widely acknowledged. For most attendees, the content of the collaboration and the profile of the collaboration partner were confirmed to be the most important factors to assess a collaboration on. But these aspects should be assessed jointly within the broader context in which the collaboration takes place.

Participants highlighted the need to include intensity, duration and scope of collaborations in the assessment. A suggestion was made to communicate more (clearly) about the choices made, both for and against certain collaborations. This not only promotes transparency, but also gives students and staff

guidance in forming their own opinions. In the long run, this helps reduce uncertainties surrounding collaborations and creates a basis on which the institution can fall back on.

### **Who should be involved in assessing collaborations?**

The idea that the dialogue itself is perhaps more important than the final outcome was widely supported. By engaging in dialogue more often, you get more clarity on the institution's shared values. This helps to reinforce these values and identify any changes in the community in time.

When in doubt about collaborations, the current process, especially by students, is perceived as non-transparent. This makes it unclear where, when and by whom decisions are made. It is important to document the process of establishing collaborations transparently and accessibly. So that the entire THUAS community has a good understanding of this, and it is clear where people can go with questions or concerns. Students and staff would like to play an active role, giving everyone within the institution some form of insight into the decision-making process surrounding collaborations.

### **How is a collaboration monitored and evaluated?**

It was stressed that an assessment framework should be useful not only for establishing new collaborations, but also for evaluating and monitoring existing partnerships. Given the ongoing changes in the world and within THUAS itself, some attendees felt that collaborations should be able to be reviewed periodically. In case of doubts, it should be clear whether and how action will be taken, for example by engaging with the organisation in question. It should also be possible to terminate a collaboration in the interim. At present, it is not sufficiently clear whether The Hague has such an 'exit strategy'.

There was an understanding that it is not practical and feasible to continuously monitor every collaboration, suggestions were made to evaluate randomly and/or respond to signals from the community. This provides scope to intervene quickly when needed, without adding to the workload.

### **Red lines and red flags**

Some participants suggested explicitly excluding certain industries or companies from collaborations, such as the arms industry or organisations involved in violations of international human rights. This could be established as a red line in the institution's ethical framework. At the same time, there are situations where these boundaries are unclear. The example was given of a cyber security company that is also active in the defense industry.

Instead of 'red lines', it was suggested to work with 'red flags'. Red flags are warning signals that warrant further investigation, but not immediate exclusion or termination of a collaboration or partnership. A red flag could, for example, be a report that a potential partner is suspected of corruption or involved in a controversial political conflict. Unlike a red line, which is a hard line, a red flag calls for evaluation and possibly further investigation. Developing this line of thinking further was judged interesting and promising by several attendees.

### **Closing dialogue session**

Elisabeth Minnemann closed the session with a reflection: "As a government-funded institution, we often follow government guidelines, but I hear today and understand the desire to go further and set our own course in some cases. This raises the question of how far a knowledge institute is allowed to deviate. We cannot be neutral as The Hague University of Applied Sciences, but we must strive to be impartial and unbounded. We must remain in dialogue with the world, even with partners with whom we disagree, as long as there are clear boundaries. Thinking about those boundaries I think is an interesting and relevant exercise that we will continue in the future."