

Report Third Dialogue Session Ethical Action Framework for external collaborations - 22 April 2025

On Tuesday 22 April, the third and concluding dialogue session on the revision of the ethical action framework for external collaborations took place at The Hague University of Applied Sciences (THUAS). Led by discussion leader Andrew Makkinga, students, lecturers, and staff gathered to a) look back on the jointly completed process and b) explore how the rewritten ethical framework for action can be used and embedded within the institution.

Reflection on the journey and explanation of the revised framework

The session began with a brief review of the trajectory that started in summer 2024. Based on the need to better inform and justify ethical choices around external collaborations, valuable insights were retrieved in the first two meetings. These served as the foundation for the rewritten ethical framework. In this third session, the focus was on how this new framework can be applied in practice and widely shared within THUAS.

Chair of the Executive Board Elisabeth Minnemann stressed the importance of a shared ethical compass within THUAS. According to her, the conversation about collaborations should be an ongoing process, in which staff, students and the board share responsibility. "Collaborations take place at all levels within the university, and so ethical awareness must also be broadly shared," Elisabeth said. In doing so, the framework is not meant to be a conclusive decision tree, but a guiding tool that invites dialogue.

Observations on the content of the revised framework

During the session, participants discussed various observations on the content of the new framework, including the question whether there is trade-off between the content of a collaboration and the profile of the partner: to what extent does valuable content outweigh a socially controversial profile? The question was also raised again whether the institution should not formulate explicit 'red lines' in advance. At the same time, it was stressed that not having permanent or pre-emptive exclusions fits the character of THUAS, where space is given to dialogue and where careful consideration prevails over rigid guidelines. The general view is that it is better to keep difficult cases open for discussion than to exclude them via a 'blacklist'. In this, the ethical framework - and the preamble in particular - is seen as an appropriate tool to do justice to this complexity, by inviting conversation rather than having strict boundaries.

The use of terms such as 'politically neutral' and 'impartial or non-partisan' was also discussed. Several attendees indicated that it is difficult for an educational institution to be completely neutral, especially when it is committed to values such as sustainability, inclusion and justice. The term 'non-partisan' was felt to be appropriate: it is not about party politics, but about taking a position based on shared values. There was a clear call from the conversation to handle this terminology carefully and consistently, including in translation into English.

In addition, the visibility of existing collaboration or partnership agreements was mentioned. The desire was expressed to make them more transparent, in order to increase trust in the decision-making process and strengthen community involvement in future choices.

From document to practice: implementation and ownership

The discussion considered at length how the framework could be used in practice. Several participants expressed the need for clear communication about who is accountable for what, and how signals about questionable collaborations are picked up. The lack of a clear view of this 'escalation ladder' was mentioned by several attendees as a risk. It was suggested to work on supporting tools, such as a roadmap for staff and students who have questions about a collaboration. With accessible

contact points within programmes, services and faculties. The need for clear feedback on reports or signals from the community was also reiterated in this context

The session highlighted that staff have a central role in applying the ethical framework when engaging in collaborations. As these arise at different levels, it is important that staff show ownership and carefully assess partners and partnerships. Many attendees expressed a willingness to take that responsibility too, provided there is sufficient space and trust to make moral judgements themselves. The importance of the quality of the conversation was also underlined: providing space for doubt, discomfort and discussion contributes to a vibrant ethical culture. Instead of bureaucratic procedures, there were calls for support in the form of tools or training to be able to have this conversation properly. In this way, the framework can provide direction without restricting, and help staff reach responsible choices together with colleagues.

Looking to the future

The dialogue session concluded with a call to consider the ethical framework not as a static policy document, but as a tool for ongoing reflection and conversation. Elisabeth stressed that for staff and students it needs to be clear where to turn with questions or dilemmas, without creating unnecessary bureaucracy. Finding the right balance between trust, structure and support was seen as essential in this respect. Not every dilemma requires a formal procedure, but it must be clear who is approachable and how the process of identifying and balancing ethical question works.

In addition, the importance of structural reflection was emphasised. The Executive Board suggested meeting again in a year's time to share experiences and discuss how the framework has developed in practice. This underlined that the framework should be a living document: guiding, but always evolving, fed by practice and the conversations that ensue.

This third session completed the formal process around the revision of the THUAS' ethical action framework, but also laid a foundation for continued dialogue within our community.