

Ethical considerations when collaborating with external partners

An ethical framework for action

Introduction

The Hague University of Applied Sciences (THUAS – de Haagse Hogeschool) has laid down its mission, values and strategic ambitions in the Institution Plan 2023-2028. This institution plan is the framework for our actions; for THUAS as a whole and for each of our students and staff individually. We contribute to a sustainable and just society, educate students to become critically thinking and learning world citizens and work with our partners to find concrete answers to social issues. We do this on the basis of our core values Curious, Connecting and Caring.

Co-creation with the professional field is indispensable for our education and research and prominently included in our Institution Plan. We collaborate intensively with our external partners: our students do internships with companies, we participate in research consortia, formulate joint ambitions with governments and join forces with other (higher) education institutes. We collaborate with a wide variety of partners, each with their own mission and values. It is precisely in bringing together interests and bridging differences that co-creation emerges.

Our collaborations must be in line with our values and our mission to contribute to a sustainable and just society. Discussions about ethical considerations also touch on issues such as academic freedom, public perception and social safety. This makes it all the more important to have the conversation together, to view situations in a nuanced way and to reason on the basis of content.

This action framework aims to help with the ethical considerations surrounding external collaboration. It was developed within the framework of participation, with a broad delegation from The Hague University of Applied Sciences.

Context: strategy, policy and educational field

Our ethical considerations regarding external collaboration are primarily based on our Institutional Plan 2023-2028. (THUAS, 2023). Our actions (and thus the choice to enter into collaboration or not) must contribute to our mission, fit our three core values (curious, caring en connecting) and be in line with our strategic ambitions. This applies to collaboration on education, on research and on operations.

Specific ambitions that are relevant to collaborations are:

- Teaching and research with external partners;
- Integrating sustainability and equity in education and research;
- Sustainable and equitable business practices;
- Inclusive culture.

The vision document “An Inclusive university of applied sciences” (THUAS, 2021) elaborates on how THUAS interprets this inclusive culture. This is done on the basis of three principles: anti-discrimination, inclusive manners and inclusive governance. This vision contains general principles and concrete guidelines with regard to inclusion and thus provides ethical considerations when entering into a collaboration (with whom, but especially: how). A concrete translation of this includes the Manifesto against internship discrimination.

THUAS is committed to a sustainable and just world, including by signing the SDG Charter (SDG Netherlands, 2019). Thus, THUAS is committed to achieving the sustainable development goals, such as Gender Equality (SDG 5), Responsible Consumption and Production (SDG 12) and Climate Action (SDG 13). Collaborations with external parties should preferably contribute to the SDGs and in any case should not detract from the SDGs. We have also signed the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE, 2020), which provides the overall quality framework for European and international collaboration activities under Erasmus+, and stipulates, among other things, that the institution will ensure equal access and opportunities for all participants. And we commit to our own sustainability ambitions from our Sustainability Action Plan. [*publication date tbd*]

Since 2009, THUAS has been a UNESCO school. International connectedness, tolerance and solidarity are key objectives for schools that are members of this international school network. Schools are committed to the four UNESCO themes: peace and human rights, global citizenship, intercultural learning and sustainable development. The HHs pays attention to all four themes and includes them when engaging in collaborations with external partners

Collaboration and equal opportunities are also key themes in the Hague Educational Agenda 2022-2026 (HEA). The municipality of The Hague, THUAS and other educational institutions pull together when it comes to educational quality, accessibility and the contribution of education to the broad welfare of all inhabitants of The Hague.

Finally, THUAS also relates to the wider educational field in its own ethical considerations. Important are national government legislation, the education policy of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW), sector agreements with the Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (VH) and exchange of know-how with other educational institutions. A concrete example of this is the National Contact Point for Knowledge Security, where THUAS can get advice regarding specific collaborations in relation to knowledge safety. THUAS is therefore not alone in its ethical considerations.

What are our ethical considerations?

Fundamentally, THUAS is extremely positive about entering into collaborations with external partners. We think in terms of opportunities, look outwards and, where possible, cooperate with other organisations. Knowledge arises in the exchange; co-creation is a cornerstone of our Institutional Plan. The purpose of this framework to action is certainly not to inhibit collaboration, but rather to enable intensification through a clear framework.

When we enter into a partnership, we include ethical considerations in full. Our goal as THUAS is to educate students to become global citizens, with social impact. We also contribute to the development of students and staff, in line with the institution's social responsibility. Sustainability, equity and inclusion are central to this. A collaboration ideally contributes positively to these goals and, in any case, should not detract from them.

THUAS collaborates with external partners in various ways, both formally through long-term contracts and informally in the form of guest lectures and temporary projects. Formal collaborations are officially established and signed by the Executive Board or a director, while informal collaborations are flexible and require less documentation. Regardless, there is always some decision-making involved in entering into a collaboration. The final responsibility of formal collaborations lies with the Executive Board.

Making a considered decision about entering into a collaboration is not only a practical assessment, but also an expression of shared ownership of THUAS' mission and values. From our Institutional Plan, it follows that all members of the organisation bear responsibility for acting in line with these values. In the case of large-scale collaborations, or when doubts arise regarding existing or proposed partnerships, collective deliberation is required. The Office of the Board may provide advice in such cases.

When considering whether a collaboration is appropriate, we distinguish between the content of the collaboration and the profile of the partner. The impact that The HHs will have with the (intended) collaboration is central. If relevant, the consideration also includes the intensity, duration and scope of the collaboration.

- Content is leading: Does the collaboration contribute to our mission? It is impossible to indicate in advance of all possible collaborations whether they are desirable; the

key is *explainability*. Can THUAS explain why a collaboration contributes to our mission and fits our values? It is important to make this explicit in advance, both for ourselves and for the external partner.

- We also consider the profile of the external partner. Are the partner's mission and values compatible with those of THUAS? Does the partner demonstrate acting in line with its mission and values? Have there been any incidents that detract from the partner's profile? The explicit inclusion of shared vision and values in a preamble to the collaboration agreement, can support this (see below).

THUAS will only enter into a collaboration if both the content of the collaboration and the profile of the external partner are assessed positively. Explainability of this assessment is essential. In cases of doubt concerning the profile of an external partner, the final decision rests with the Executive Board.

It is possible to include in a preamble of a cooperation agreement a shared vision and shared values. Or stating the vision and ethical interests of both individual parties. These can also be agreements on the principles of cooperation, in addition to agreements on the specific content of cooperation. By establishing these principles at the beginning of a collaboration, there is also actionable perspective for evaluating a collaboration on an occasional or periodic basis and discussing it with the collaboration partner.

Ethical Considerations in Practice

As THUAS, we are in constant contact with the world around us. As an educational institution, we adhere to our own core values but always maintain an open mind. We also consciously choose to be politically non-partisan. As institution, we do maintain ethical boundaries when engaging in external collaborations. The “no harm” principle applies here.

These boundaries are not set in stone; it is impossible to establish strict red lines in advance. Rather, THUAS works with warning signals, which stem from our mission and come from within our own organisation or from society. A kind of ‘red flags’. A red flag can be a request from within the organisation, a signal from other educational institutions, or a current event. And serves as an indication for further investigation, or conversation with the collaboration partner and evaluation. This creates space to consider context and nuances before making a final decision on (continuing) a collaboration. These signals thus provide directors and board members with tools for evaluating collaborations. Following such investigation, feedback on the outcome is always provided.

Weighing ethical considerations in external collaborations is not only desirable when entering into new collaborations, but also when evaluating, monitoring and extending existing partnerships. Principles and context of collaborations may change, due to external factors, new information or actions of the collaboration partner. If any trepidation arises in the interim

about an external collaboration, this is always discussed. In principle internally at the level where the collaboration was initiated, possibly with advice from colleagues from the Office of the Board. If necessary, discussions can also always be held with the collaboration partner. In extreme cases, the Executive Board has the authority to decide whether or not to terminate or extend a collaboration.

Formal and strategic collaborations are evaluated after completion or periodically to determine whether they are still in line with the goals of THUAS and whether partners adhere to the agreed norms and values. For informal collaborations, this is done incidentally through spot checks from the organisational unit involved, and upon signals from the THUAS community.

THUAS considers it important to seek nuance, put content first and substantiate considerations transparently. It may be tempting to base decisions about collaborations on fixed rules, lists and/or exclusion mechanisms, or to place them in the hands of a committee. But in doing so, we place the ethical considerations squarely outside ourselves. THUAS values open conversations, as dialogue provides an opportunity to clarify positions, acknowledge perspectives and accept that consensus is not always achievable.

Working arrangements

- ✓ Colleagues are primarily responsible themselves for entering into and maintaining external collaboration. Therefore, weighing whether a collaboration fits within our mission and values is in principle an assessment that colleagues themselves make. This suits the professionalism of our colleagues and our content-driven collaborations.
- ✓ We make explicit what assessment we make when collaborating with external partners, both in terms of the content of the collaboration and the profile of the partner. We do this for ourselves (internally when making decisions) and towards the partner (externally when deciding whether or not to enter into a collaboration). This increases explainability. If desired, we include a shared vision or values in the preamble of a collaboration agreement with an external partner. See Annex 1 for more information on preambles and a sample text.
- ✓ Everyone from THUAS community can pass on signals about an ongoing or future collaboration at any time. Upon further investigation, feedback on the outcome follows. THUAS chooses not to create a decision tree or established step-by-step plan, and to align as much as possible with existing help and reporting structures. See Annex 2 for more information on considerations and signalling in practice.

- ✓ We ensure transparency about the importance of collaborations with external partners, including considerations when cooperation is/is not desirable. Decisions made on collaborations, both at the formal and informal level, must always be explainable in retrospect.
- ✓ In case of large-scale cooperation or a formal collaboration, or in case of uncertainty or even doubts, the Office of the Board is contacted. Formal collaboration agreements are recorded in the register managed by the Office of the Board. The Executive Board holds final decision-making authority with regard to entering into, extending, or terminating these collaborations.
- ✓ Where necessary, we seek external advice from, for example, the Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (Vereniging Hogescholen), the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science or the National Contact Point for Knowledge Security.
- ✓ We are attentive to ethical considerations even after the start of the collaboration: incidents during the collaboration can also be reason to reconsider a collaboration.
- ✓ We organise and facilitate knowledge sharing in an THUAS External Relations Expertise Network, with participants from all faculties, Centres of Expertise and departments. In addition, we periodically organise institution-wide dialogue on ethical principles and dilemmas related to external collaborations.

Sources

- The Hague University of Applied Sciences, [Strategic Plan 2023 - 2028](#)
- The Hague University of Applied Sciences, [An Inclusive University of Applied Sciences](#) (2021) (only in Dutch)
- The Hague University of Applied Sciences, Sustainability Action Plan (not yet final)
- The Hague University of Applied Sciences, [Implementation Plan Code of Conduct for Scientific Integrity](#) (2019)
- European Commission, [Erasmus Charter for Higher Education](#) (ECHE) (2020)
- SDG Netherlands, [SDG Charter](#) (2019)
- UNESCO Netherlands Commission, [UNESCO Schools Network](#) (2009) (only in Dutch)
- Municipality of The Hague, [The Hague Educational Agenda 2022-2026](#) (only in Dutch)

Annex 1 : Preamble

Purpose and Potential Added Value of a Preamble

Preambles come in various forms. We view a preamble as a somewhat extended, stand-alone "introductory declaration" that outlines the considerations, motivations, and—above all—the goals of a collaboration agreement.

- The preamble allows for explicitly stating, within the same document, the broader context in which the agreement has been established, as well as the intentions the parties seek to pursue through the conclusion of the contract.
- It includes a summary of intentions and values that are important to the parties involved and that form the foundation for closer cooperation. For example, parties may use the preamble to highlight the importance of respecting democratic principles and human rights, and to express their shared ambition to deepen cooperation in areas such as sustainable development, climate change, and the fight for a more inclusive society.
- A preamble does not need to be overly long. However, it should allow for clarity in cases where differing interpretations of the agreement arise—potentially many years after its conclusion—by providing insight into the original intent of the collaboration. In doing so, it offers interpretive guidance to those who are called upon to determine the meaning of specific provisions.
- The preamble may also reference underlying frameworks, regulations, provisions, and documents that the partners are expected to observe—such as those forming the ethical framework for action listed on pages 1–3.

The function of a preamble may be

- a) Legal: embedding the core values and principles upon which the collaboration is based, thereby providing a framework for interpretation;
- b) Expressive: articulating the underlying values and principles of the partnership;
- c) Evocative: inspiring a sense of unity and shared purpose.

For inspiration: Example Preamble Text

The Hague University of Applied Sciences and [Name of Partner], hereinafter jointly referred to as ‘the Parties’, share the ambition to contribute together to an inclusive, just, and sustainable society. Guided by a shared curiosity for knowledge, a caring approach to societal challenges, and a strong desire for meaningful connection, the Parties join forces. This collaboration is grounded in the values that define The Hague University of Applied Sciences: curious, caring, and connecting.

The Parties recognise the vital role of education and research in driving societal transitions. In doing so, they draw inspiration from international frameworks and agreements such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the UNESCO principles for inclusive and ethical higher education.

This partnership aims to strengthen education, research, and practice, with a particular focus on three key themes: the transition to sustainability, the promotion of a just society, and the shaping of a digital future. [To be specified depending on the nature of the agreement and the profile of the partner.] This agreement sets out the framework and intentions within which this collaboration will take shape.

Annex 2: Considerations and signalling in practice

The responsibility for considering whether or not to collaborate with an external partner does not always lie with one individual. Many considerations and decisions are made as part of a team and thus with the agreement of a manager. A collaboration is therefore unlikely to be started if there is no agreement within a group. An individual or group may, however, need support in having ethical conversations. Or may need clarity on what options are available for passing signals.

The Hague University of Applied Sciences seeks a balance between providing transparency on the process of signalling and avoiding unnecessary administrative burden by extensive reporting. The system is therefore designed to link up as much as possible with existing help and reporting structures and support services of The Hague University of Applied Sciences where students, lecturers and staff can go.

In practice, this means:

- Signs can be reported by students in the first instance to a lecturer concerned or to their study counsellor or mentor/tutor/coach. Colleagues can contact their immediate supervisor.
- For discussion support within teams, colleagues can contact the HRM department. They have team coaches who can support conversations about ethical considerations.
- Teams can also use moral deliberation tools, a "step-by-step plan" for structured analysis of ethical dilemmas. Several examples can be found [online](#).
- For knowledge security or social safety issues, students and colleagues can contact the Department of Education, Knowledge & Communication (OKC) service. They have social safety and knowledge security advisors and are familiar with THUAS' reporting procedures.
- For advice on external developments or issues affecting the profile of a collaboration partner, colleagues can contact the Office of the Board. The Inclusion Office and Team Strategy with advisors on external and international relations can advise on the ethical considerations at hand.
- When there is a need for a sounding board group, colleagues with the following roles and/or expertise may make a valuable contribution:
 - substantively involved colleagues from the faculty or Centre of Expertise, preferably including a manager or director with formal responsibility;
 - colleagues with expertise in ethics, such as members of an ethical advisory committee;
 - colleagues with expertise in integral, social or knowledge security, from the OKC service;

- colleagues from the Strategy team within the Office of the Board, contributing a broader institutional and external perspective.

NB: This list is not exhaustive and serves as inspiration.