

# Assessment guidelines for external collaborations

Part of UvA Policy on External Collaborations, version 6 December 2024

## 1. Introduction

As the University of Amsterdam, we highly value freedom and responsibility in science and education as they are pivotal for the advancement of knowledge and for the promotion of science as a global public good. We aim to foster value-driven collaborations with partners that share common values, such as academic freedom, justice, equality, inclusion, and sustainability. Our teaching and research should have the greatest possible scientific and social impact on people, the planet, and society, now and for the future. This implies careful assessment of collaborations in the light of:

- involvement in or contribution to armed conflict or gross and systematic human rights violations<sup>1</sup>
- risks to knowledge security,<sup>2</sup> incl. likelihood of dual-use or misuse of research results and its application for military or terrorist purposes
- serious and irreversible adverse impact on climate, environment, biodiversity, or cultural heritage

This document aims to promote reflection on existing and intended collaborations and increase the vigilance of UvA staff and students regarding the societal impact of their educational, research, valorisation and patient care activities, both positive and negative. It describes the collaboration assessment process and provides tools to assist UvA staff and departments in assessing whether a collaboration with an external partner is controversial, and in reflecting on measures or strategies necessary to prevent or mitigate identified/potential risks. Furthermore, this document provides guidance in deciding whether the collaboration should be submitted for review to the Advisory Committee on External Collaborations (ACEC), as part of the [UvA policy on external collaborations](#).<sup>3</sup>

As this is a new instrument, as UvA will learn to apply it, regularly evaluate it, and revise when necessary. A first evaluation of this document will take place six months after coming into force.

While all types of collaborations should be carefully considered, these guidelines apply to institutional collaborations, that is, collaborations concluded with a document signed by the University of Amsterdam as an institution, either by a central service or by one of its faculties/departments. It relates to partners directly involved in research, education, patient care, and knowledge valorisation activities (including, but not limited to, faculties, departments/institutes, governmental bodies and non-governmental organizations, companies) as well as the funders of such activities.

The Committee focuses on the following types of institutional collaborations:

- Student exchange programs
- Research conducted within multi-partner consortia (e.g. Horizon Europe)
- Research collaborations with companies

Collaboration on a joint paper, presentations at conferences, guest lectures, or an internship by an individual student at another institution do not count as *institutional* collaboration.

<sup>1</sup> **Gross human rights violations** relate to the nature of the violations (e.g. serious attacks on the physical and psychological integrity of individuals and groups); **systematic human rights violations** are violations that occur recurrently, which means that they can no longer be regarded as occasional, but can reasonably be assumed to be inherent in a partner's established practice or policy. See also <https://uhri.ohchr.org/en>.

<sup>2</sup> **Knowledge security** is evaluated in relation to significant risks for the security of human dignity, life, health, freedom, property, the environment or peaceful coexistence. Security-relevant risks arise, in particular, in research which produces knowledge, products or technologies that could be misused directly by third parties.

<sup>3</sup> Please note that the ACEC operates alongside the existing body of ethical committees and is not intended to replace their tasks or responsibilities.

## 2. Assessment process

1. **Reflection on collaboration.** Reflect on the normative aspects of the intended collaboration, using the questionnaire in section 3. Do this with colleagues in your institute/department. The goal of this step is to identify scientific benefits of the collaboration, risks and/or moral issues involved, and strategies you could apply, preferably together with the partner in question, to mitigate the risks. If the answer to any of the questions is 'likely', 'highly likely', or 'yes', and you wish to proceed with the collaboration, consult the research/educational leadership in your institution (research or educational director, or any other body mandated by the Dean).
2. **Assessment of collaborations.** Discuss the results of your reflection and use the Risk Assessment Matrix and the accompanying table in section 4 to decide together with your research/educational leadership how to proceed, and whether to request advice from the Advisory Committee. In case your collaboration falls into the yellow or orange category, always discuss with your leadership whether to put a request for advice forward to the Advisory Committee. In case it falls in the red category, always consult the Advisory Committee.<sup>4</sup> In case of a disagreement on how to proceed (e.g., when you wish to pursue the collaboration in question against the negative advice of the research/educational leadership), approach the Dean. The Dean can either agree with the research director or give permission to submit a request for advice to the Advisory Committee.
3. **Requesting advice.** Submit a request for advice from the Advisory Committee on External Collaborations (see request form in Appendix 1). In the request form, you will be asked to (a) provide a short project description, incl. the goals of research, research area/problem, and methodology; (b) elaborate on your motivation for and benefits of collaboration; (c) reflect on the possible risks of the project/collaboration and measures you will install to minimize these risks. Your request should be accompanied by the results of the assessment (based on the guiding questions and Risk Assessment Matrix).
4. **Deliberation by ACEC.** Requests will be assessed by the Advisory Committee in a confidential process of deliberation. To facilitate deliberation and formulating an advice, the committee might request additional information and/or an expert opinion. The advice on whether and how to proceed with a specific collaboration is informed by the weighing of arguments and alternatives. The committee may also consider the legal and reputational consequences of (termination of) collaboration and/or suggest conditions under which the collaboration could be pursued.
5. **Draft Advice by ACEC.** The draft advice of the Committee will be put forward to the applicant(s) for a factual check.
6. **Final Advice by ACEC.** The advice will be sent to the Dean (or the Executive Board), with a copy to the applicant(s) and the educational/research leadership.
7. **Decision on entering the collaboration.** Decision on entering the collaboration belongs to the entity signing the collaboration agreement, i.e. Dean or the Executive Board. If there is disagreement on the decision, it should be resolved between the Dean and the educational/research leadership, or, where applicable, between the Executive Board and the Dean.

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<sup>4</sup> According to UvA policy, any research collaboration with a party from the fossil fuel industry should be submitted to the Advisory Committee on External Collaborations.

In case of new collaborations, begin your assessment in an early stage of your project/planned activities to allow the Advisory Committee to issue their advice, if required, prior to commencement of any collaborative activities, such as joined submission of a grant application.

In case of existing collaborations, start the (re)assessment process as soon as one of the conditions for reassessment are met (section 5).

### 3. Questions guiding assessment

The following set of questions is intended to help in assessing potential risks of collaborations and point to scenarios in which heightened vigilance is necessary. The aim of the questions is to stimulate reflection on (un)intended impacts of a collaboration through the lens of responsible science, and to help to identify and to specify the most relevant concrete risks the collaboration might involve.

The questions tap on three different aspects of a collaboration: the topic/activities, the collaboration partner (that is partner directly involved in research, education, patient care, and knowledge valorisation activities, such as faculties, departments/institutes, companies, governmental bodies and non-governmental organizations as well as the funders of such activities), and the geopolitical context. Not all questions apply to all collaborations. The answers will help you to locate the collaboration in the Risk Assessment Matrix in section 4, and to decide, together with the research/educational leadership in your institution, whether to request an advice of the Advisory Committee.

Topic/activities				
Do the activities concern research into, production of, or trade in goods that fall under the <a href="#">'Common EU Military List'</a> ? Or is it specifically intended for military purposes?	no		yes	
Are the activities subjected <a href="#">to trade-restrictive measures (sanctions)</a> ?	no		yes	
Do the activities involve research with a (possible) military or terrorist application, or will it result in software, technology or products covered, for instance, by the <a href="#">'EU list of dual-use goods'</a> ?	highly unlikely	unlikely	likely	highly likely
Do the activities involve research that can be used for cyber-attacks, espionage, or surveillance of citizens?	highly unlikely	unlikely	likely	highly likely
Do the activities involve or contribute to serious and irreversible adverse impact on climate, biodiversity, environment, cultural heritage, and other ecosystems? See e.g. the <a href="#">Nagoya Protocol</a> .	highly unlikely	unlikely	likely	highly likely
Do the activities concern research with a significant risk of abuse by third parties, for example, the development of a highly pathogenic virus, a technology that can decrypt all encryptions, or interfering with media, public opinion or election?	highly unlikely	unlikely	likely	highly likely
Might the activities lead to suppression of minorities, or cause or directly contribute to gross and systematic human rights violations, e.g. through misuse of findings or applications? See e.g. <a href="#">Universal Human Rights Index</a> .	highly unlikely	unlikely	likely	highly likely

<b>Collaboration partner(s)<sup>5</sup></b>				
Are any of the collaboration partners subjected to any form of embargo and/or listed among companies, organizations or governments that violate the <a href="#">Ten Principles of the UN Global Compact</a> ? (see also: <a href="#">Entities   EU sanctions tracker</a> )	no	yes		
Over the past 5 years, have there been documented accusations that any of the collaboration partners are involved in gross and systematic human rights violations? See e.g. the <a href="#">Universal Human Rights Index</a> .	no	yes		
Over the past 5 years, have there been documented accusations that any of the collaboration partners is involved in serious environmental damage or animal suffering?	no	yes		
Over the past 5 years, have there been documented accusations that any of the collaboration partners acts in violation of the <a href="#">EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD)</a> , <a href="#">EU regulations on animal research</a> or otherwise contributing to animal suffering?	no	yes		
Over the past 5 years, have there been documented accusations that any of the collaboration partners are systematically violating <a href="#">academic freedom</a> of their staff, fellows and/or students?	no	yes		
Do any of the collaboration partners extract fossil fuels (including oil, natural gas, coal and lignite) from the earth)?	no	yes		
<b>Collaboration partner(s) – extra questions for exchange and fellowship programmes</b>				
Are UvA students or staff participating in the exchange or fellowship programme, etc., put in a setting where their exercise of human rights, such as freedom of expression or freedom of movement, is likely to be restricted?	highly unlikely	unlikely	likely	highly likely
Is there a possibility that UvA students or staff participating in the exchange or fellowship programme will or have to participate in or contribute to research that violates human rights in a gross and systematic way?	highly unlikely	unlikely	likely	highly likely
Is there a possibility of UvA students or staff entering an unsafe setting in terms of security? (consult travel restrictions/negative travel advice issued by the <a href="#">Ministry of Foreign Affairs</a> )	highly unlikely	unlikely	likely	highly likely
<b>Geopolitical context</b>				
Is the country in which the partner operates subject to sanctions, for example, those imposed by the Dutch Government, the EU, the UN? (see, e.g., <a href="#">Sanctions list</a> )	no	yes		

<sup>5</sup> A collaborating partner is a partner directly involved in research, education, patient care and knowledge valorisation activities as well as the funders of such activities. In case of academic institutions, the level of assessment depends on the level of institutional collaboration (whole university, faculty, department/institute, depending on who is signing a collaboration agreement).

Does the collaboration take place in a geopolitical context where gross and systematic human rights violations have been documented? See e.g. the <a href="#">Universal Human Rights Index</a> .	highly unlikely	unlikely	likely	highly likely
Does the collaboration take place in a geopolitical context where academic institutions are likely to be instrumentalised by the government and/or where academic freedom of scholars and students is likely to be limited by the government? See e.g. an <a href="#">academic freedom index</a> or a <a href="#">democracy index</a> .	highly unlikely	unlikely	likely	highly likely

#### 4. Risk Assessment Matrix

The Assessment matrix is intended to assist in defining the risk level associated with a collaboration and to determine the necessary follow-up steps.

The extent to which a collaboration partner and/or topic/activities are controversial differs depending on the broader context. More specifically, the extent to which a collaboration is controversial depends on the particular combination of topic/activities, collaboration partner, and the geopolitical context in which the collaboration partner operates. The matrix below and the examples provided shed further light on the complexity and point to scenarios in which heightened vigilance is necessary.

More specifically, we define the topic/activities, collaboration partner, or geopolitical context as controversial when:

<b>Topic/activities:</b> Collaborations can be considered controversial because of the topic or activities. It is therefore important to pay attention to existing legal frameworks and (disciplinary) guidelines.	<i>Examples of a controversial topic/activities include topics/activities that may lead to military or dual use application, involve or lead to gross and systematic human rights violations, increase risks concerning foreign interference and knowledge security; have serious and irreversible adverse impact on climate, environment, cultural heritage, and other ecosystems; negatively affect wellbeing of animals. The same topics/activities may pose different levels of risk depending on the collaboration partner and/or the geopolitical context in which the partner operates.</i>
<b>Collaboration partner:</b> Whether a partner can be labelled as controversial, depends on the values it respects/stands for, such as academic freedom, academic integrity, environmental, social and economic sustainability, equity, and human rights.	<i>Examples of a controversial partner include a partner subjected to a form of embargo; partner involved in gross and systematic human rights violations; partner directly involved or activities causing serious irreversible adverse damage to climate, biodiversity, environment, cultural heritage, and other eco-systems and/or causing animal suffering. Additionally, whether a partner is considered ‘controversial’ may depend on how it operates within a specific geopolitical context (e.g., level of autonomy with an authoritarian regime).</i>
<b>Geopolitical context:</b> The geopolitical context in which a partner operates may have great impact on the risks to knowledge security, the likelihood of	<i>Examples include areas affected by an armed conflict; areas where gross and systematic violations of human rights have been documented (see, for example, UN resolutions, court rulings, etc.); contexts where the</i>

dual-use or misuse of research results and applications, the likelihood of partners involvement or direct contribution to gross and systematic human rights violations and/or activities that have serious and irreversible adverse impact on climate, environment, cultural heritage or animal well-being. It may also affect academic freedom of the scholars, and the students involved.	<i>(authoritarian) regime may affect the cooperation (e.g. through large-scale discrimination against a certain ethnic group that is likely to affect research activities; systematic censorship and serious limitations of academic freedom) contexts in which academic institutions are instrumentalised by the government in a policy of human rights violations (e.g. cooperation in prosecuting dissidents or legitimising human rights violations); countries subjected to a form of (international) embargo.</i>
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Please consult the risk assessment matrix below to identify the risk level attached to the proposed collaboration. Use your answers to questions in section 3 to guide you. For example, if all your answers were ‘no’ or ‘highly unlikely’, the risk is likely to be ‘very low’; if your answer to any of the questions was ‘unlikely’ or ‘likely’, the risk might be low to medium; and if your answer to any of the questions was ‘likely’ or ‘highly likely’, the risk might be medium to high. Reflect also on possible mitigation strategies. Mitigation strategies may involve, among other things, adjusting the study design to diminish adverse consequences of the research to animal well-being, measures taken by the partner to prevent damage to cultural heritage, explicit agreements on the teaching activities and housing of students, an inclusion of special provisions (e.g., against greenwashing). It is advised to include an exit clause in all collaboration agreements to enable termination or alteration of the collaboration, in case implementation of the activities deviates from the original agreements and/or the (geopolitical) context changes (see section 5).

### Risk Assessment Matrix

Partner and its geopolitical context \ Topic/activity	Uncontroversial	Somewhat controversial	Controversial
Non-controversial partner in non-controversial geopolitical context	very low	low	medium
Non-controversial partner in controversial geopolitical context	low	medium	medium
controversial partner in non-controversial geopolitical context	medium	medium	high
controversial partner in controversial geopolitical context	medium	high	high

Consult the corresponding colour in the table below to decide on the follow-up steps.

**Table 1. Action to take based on identified risk level**

	Explanation	Action
Very low	<p>Neither the topic/activity nor the collaboration partner and the geopolitical context are controversial.</p> <p>The identified risk level is low. However, the collaboration may entail unidentified risks, and the risks assessed here may change in the future.</p> <p><i>e.g. research on treatment of addiction funded by Public Health Services in a geopolitical context in which academic freedom is guaranteed</i></p>	<p>In case of doubt, you may want to discuss with your research or educational leadership.</p>
Low	<p>The same topic/activity may be controversial with one collaboration partner and not with another, or the controversial character lies solely in the topic/activity itself.</p> <p>The identified risk level is low. However, the specific aspects of the collaboration potentially pose a heightened risk, and the risks assessed here may change in the future.</p> <p><i>e.g. research on treatment of addiction funded by Public Health Services in a geopolitical context in which academic freedom is not guaranteed</i></p>	<p>Discuss with your research or educational leadership the risks involved in collaboration and mitigation strategies, and jointly decide if ACEC needs to be consulted.</p>
Medium	<p>In case of a controversial topic/activity, they must always meet the legal requirements. If the research has a low TRL level, it may be excluded from legal requirements. The same topic/activity may be controversial with one collaboration partner and not with another. This applies, potentially to an even greater extent, when both the collaboration partner and the geopolitical context are controversial.</p> <p>The identified risk level is elevated. Pay attention to risks and their management.</p> <p><i>e.g. research on treatment of addiction funded by the tobacco industry in a geopolitical context which no gross and systematic human rights violations occur</i>  <i>e.g. research into a universal decryption tool financed by Dutch Research Council, regardless of geopolitical context</i></p>	<p>Discuss with your research/educational leadership the risks involved in collaboration and mitigation strategies, and jointly decide if ACEC needs to be consulted.</p> <p><i>UvA Policy states that a collaboration with a fossil fuel company always requires consultation of the ACEC.</i></p>
High	<p>In case of a controversial topic/activity, they must always meet the legal requirements. In case of a low TRL level, it may be excluded from legal requirements. Collaborations with a controversial collaboration partner and/or in a controversial geopolitical context is prohibited by law in some cases but deserve extra attention regardless. Potentially controversial topics/activities require extra scrutiny when the collaboration is with a controversial collaboration partner and in a controversial geopolitical context.</p> <p>The identified risk level is high. Undertake action on identified risks.</p> <p><i>e.g. research on treatment of addiction funded by the tobacco industry in a geopolitical context in which gross and systematic human rights violations occur</i>  <i>e.g. research into a universal decryption tool financed by a military research agency, regardless of geopolitical context</i></p>	<p>If you wish to continue exploring the intended collaboration, consult with your educational or research leadership and file an Advice Request to the ACEC.</p>

## 5. Re-assessing existing collaborations

Collaborations with external parties may need to be reassessed due to intensification of risks associated with a partnership or geopolitical context. When the developments below occur, a reassessment should be conducted by scholars involved and/or the research/educational leadership:

- **Developments in the geopolitical context in which collaborating institution operates:**
  - Emergence of an armed conflict
  - Regime change having consequences with regard to topics/activities, collaboration partner, or geopolitical context
  - Serious or repeated accusations of gross and systematic violations of human rights
  - Sanctions by the Dutch government, European Commission or other international bodies
  - Resolutions by international bodies: Council of Europe, United Nations
  - Rulings by international or regional courts
  
- **Changes in the profile/status of a collaboration partner:**
  - Changing status of the funder/ funding scheme (from 'uncontroversial' into 'controversial' (see Risk Assessment Matrix in section 4)
  - Changing status regarding knowledge security (from 'uncontroversial' into 'controversial')
  - Partner listed as an organisation/country that violates the UN Global Compact Ten Principles
  - Documented accusations of gross and systematic human rights violations and/or complicity in such violations that take place in the geopolitical context in which it operates.

## 6. Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, these guidelines as well as the UvA policy on external collaboration will be subject to periodic reviews and updates. Please consult the [website](#) for the latest version of this document.

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## **Appendix 1: Request form for advice by the Advisory Committee on External Collaborations (ACEC)**

*Application form for advice by the Advisory Committee on External Collaborations (ACEC) on collaborations with institutional partners.*

An advice by the Advisory Committee is obligatory for collaborative projects that concern military or dual use research, (in)directly lead to human rights violations, pose risks concerning foreign interference and knowledge security, or research projects that involve parties from the fossil fuel sector.

For more information on the general Framework and procedures, please consult the [website]. In case of questions, you may contact [e-mail].

Please send your application to [email], together with following attachments:

- Filled-in copy of this Request form
- (Short) research, exchange or other relevant proposal, if applicable
- Results of the assessment using the Assessment Tool and Risk Assessment Matrix

### **1. Project Information**

Title research project/exchange programme:

Institute/Faculty involved:

Person requesting collaboration:

Funding agency, if applicable:

Partners involved in institutional collaboration:

The scientific impact of the proposed research

The added value of the educational exchange

The potential societal impact of the valorisation collaboration

### **2. Information on planned collaboration**

What is the scope of the proposed collaboration?

What is the motivation for (goals) and benefits of the proposed collaboration? How does it fit in the faculty's and/or institute's research or educational agenda?

If a party from the fossil fuel energy sector is involved, how does it contribute to the achievement of the targets under the Paris Agreement? Can this research be conducted without participation of this fossil fuel party? *(In line with [UvA policy](#), any intended research collaboration with a company that extracts fossil fuels from the earth needs to be put forward to the committee).*

### 3. Reflection

Please provide reflection on your collaboration in light of the Questions Guiding Assessment and the Risk Assessment Matrix. Focus on the risks and mitigation measures that you will take as well as the discussions on these matters that took place in your research or education institute. Reflect on the normative aspects of the collaboration and its impacts, both positive and negative.

*You can use the following key concepts to help you formulate a reflection:*

**Risks:** public allegations of human rights violations; involvement with military applications; involvement (direct or indirect) in warfare; possibility of misuse of research results; discrimination; academic freedom; data breaches; political interference; espionage. Provide details on all screening questions answered in affirmative.

**Measures:** access control; "supply chain" knowledge; end-user screening; data security

**4. For externally funded PhD-programmes and PhDs funded by scholarships, please answer the following questions**

1. *Will the candidate be using personal data or commercially sensitive data?*

2. *Are there possibilities for applying the research and/or data for:*

- o military use/use for planning cyber attacks*
- o international espionage/cyber surveillance*
- o influencing media or elections outside the country of origin*
- o surveillance of citizens (in the country of origin)*
- o suppression of minorities (in the country of origin)*
- o influencing media/public opinion*
- o violating human rights in general*

3. *Are there possibilities for steering the research or educational activities in such directions during the student, PhD-candidate, or postdoc?*

4. *Could the academic freedom of the candidate be limited by the government in question? Also in light of the academic freedom index [Academic Freedom Index \(academic-freedom-index.net\)](http://academic-freedom-index.net).*

5. *Could the candidate otherwise be put under pressure if the research results are contrary to the position of the government in question?*