

Qualitative Assessment Model Sensitive Collaborations

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Advisory Committee Sensitive Collaborations

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Introduction

The Advisory Committee Sensitive Collaborations (ACSC)¹ has been established by the Executive Board of Erasmus University Rotterdam to offer advice to the university about collaborating with partners in sensitive contexts (e.g., a country, a region, a specific community, or a sector of industry). The collaboration can be called sensitive when it engages countries subject to national or international restrictions, is potentially linked to human rights violations, concerns controversial societal topics, or may jeopardize EUR core values.

While the fundamental attitude of academics towards collaboration with academic and societal partners is positive, it is a matter of responsible science, “recognizing its benefits and possible harms” (Statute of the International Science Council), to assess our collaborations when they are sensitive in this way.

This responsibility holds for every individual scholar, but also for the university as an institution. The mandate of the ACSC focuses on the institutional level. Individual collaboration between academics, such as writing an article together, belongs to the realm of individual academic freedom and responsibility. When collaboration entails formal institutional decisions (such as joint grant applications, participation in exams or committees, and so on), they are considered institutional. The ACSC can be requested by the Executive Board or the Deans to offer advice on a specific collaboration or on all collaborations if they consider the context sensitive.

The advice given by the ACSC will be offered to the Executive Board and the Deans. Unless decided otherwise, the advice will then also be published on the EUR website. It is ultimately the Deans or the Executive Board that decide whether they will follow the advice.

In the spring of 2024, the Executive Board has made a first request for advice by the ACSC in relation to collaborations in the context of Israel and Palestine in view of the uncertainty in faculties how to deal with this matter.² Several other contexts have been identified where a similar request seems relevant.

The assessment model below is a generic model that is meant to be applicable to different sensitive contexts, both for existing and intended collaborations. In one case it may be used to assess collaboration with a contested sector of industry, in another case it will serve the assessment of collaboration with a partner in a context of armed conflict or within an oppressed minority. Obviously, some questions and aspects may be more pertinent in one context than in another. The model will be evaluated and improved along the way and remains in that sense a working document. The ACSC furthermore aims to develop a user-friendly web-based assessment tool that faculty boards, ethics committees, international offices, individual researchers, and others can use to make their own assessments based on this model. Wherever possible, the outcomes of assessments should also be discussed with collaboration partners as we assume them to be equally dedicated to responsible science or societal engagement. These processes should contribute to an academic culture of increased responsibility regarding our societal impact.

¹ See the ACSC framework: <https://www.eur.nl/media/2024-07-framework-acsc-2024-06-11>

² A parallel request has been made regarding collaboration with partners in the context of fossil fuel. A separate committee with its own procedures has been tasked with this request. An evaluation of both processes is foreseen in 2025 and eventually this might lead to one structural committee in the future.

Structure and aim of the assessment model

The overall aim of the assessment model is twofold. 1) It invites initiators of (sensitive) collaborations to reflect upon the intentions, (EUR) values and positive impacts inherent in their project while also considering the potential risks and (unintended) consequences involved. This is why the ACSC will be asking for initiators to submit a short narrative based on indicative questions broken down into four rubrics (below). The questions are phrased in a way that stimulates nuanced responses and moral reasoning. Initiators will be asked to substantiate their answers with references to external sources that are as objective as possible, including established indicators. Usually, there is no binary response, and individuals and faculties seeking to engage in collaboration will need to make explicit how they weigh the arguments and options.

2) It will be the model for the ACSC to provide formal advice to the Executive Board and deans if so requested. The advice by the ACSC on whether and how to proceed with a specific collaboration will be informed by the combination of the answers provided. The weighing of arguments and alternatives that is central to the model will also be reflected and made explicit in the ACSC's advice. The overall attitude of the ACSC is to facilitate academic collaboration as much as possible, unless the committee sees clear threats or risks that go beyond unidimensional risks related only to knowledge security or ethics, as those are the purview of the relevant committees on those issues.

The ACSC has developed a qualitative assessment model based on four fundamental questions:

1. What are the risks?
2. Who is our partner?
3. What is the connection to the risks?
4. What is the effect of our actions?

These four questions are interlocking. The order in which the questions are answered is not fixed as in a flowchart.



The left side of the model focuses on the concrete context in which collaboration takes place, while the right side focuses on the actors involved and their relationships. Furthermore, the top half of the model focuses on our partner and their direct context, while the bottom half focuses on our own role in relation to that context.

The assessment on the four dimensions above can result in a positive or a provisional negative advice. In the latter case, a secondary set of three questions is to be answered to investigate legal and reputational considerations and the question whether conditions can be suggested under which collaboration is possible despite critical issues in the assessment. These secondary questions are:

1. What are the legal consequences of (termination of) collaboration?
2. What are the reputational consequences of (termination of) collaboration?
3. Can conditions be set for the collaboration that would address the concerns expressed in the provisional advice?

The answers to these sets of questions will guide the ACSC in its advice regarding existing and intended collaborations. At the same time, they form the basis for researchers, lecturers, and project leaders to come to a systematic, evidence-based narrative on the collaborations they envisage. This is specifically relevant when working in contexts that might be considered sensitive. In general terms, the process contributes to a culture of academic responsibility by stimulating reflexivity on the praxis of academic research and its potential societal impact in a way that allows for nuanced qualitative assessment of specific aspirations in vulnerable contexts and the question whether our collaborations directly or indirectly cause harm or lead to positive societal impact.

1. What are the relevant risks?

The aim of this question is not to arrive at an exhaustive inventory of all possible risks, but to identify and specify the most relevant concrete risks for this specific collaboration. This will usually be directly related to the reason why certain collaborations have been classified by the Executive Board or the deans as 'sensitive', and thus will be linked either to the context in which the collaboration takes place (for example because the partner is located in a country that is involved in armed conflict or otherwise at high risk for human rights violations) or to a certain sector of industry (for example fossil fuel or arms).

The risk assessment will focus on four main areas:

Human rights risks exist when the context of the collaboration involves a serious risk of infringements upon the civil and political, or economic, social and cultural rights of people in the partner context. These different categories of fundamental human rights as set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other documents, but also including indigenous rights, humanitarian law, et cetera, are central to the work of the Advisory Committee Sensitive Collaborations. If the collaboration takes place in a context of armed conflict, this is an additional indicator of high risk of human rights violations.

Risks of compromising EUR values, including ethical risks, exist when the (context of) the collaboration involves actions, practices or structures that are inconsistent with fundamental values of the university. These include values mentioned in the EUR code of integrity such as reliability, respect for humans, transparency, cooperativeness. It also includes values that are central to EUR's strategy like global citizenship and equity. Sustainability might even count as a specific category that merits specific attention in the assessment, especially in sensitive contexts where it is at high risk.³ Academic integrity and academic freedom are obviously pertinent. All this is implied in EUR's mission of making a positive societal impact.

Knowledge security risks exist in case of potential undesirable transfer of sensitive knowledge and technology, especially when such would put national (i.e., Dutch) security at risk. Second, such risks also exist in case of possible covert influence of education and research by states and non-state actors where this may threaten academic freedom and social safety. Knowledge security can be linked to ethical issues and fundamental rights.⁴ If the knowledge security risks of a collaboration are unidimensional in the sense that they don't involve human rights risks or risks of compromising EUR values, the protocols for knowledge security are guiding, and there is no specific role for the ACSC.

Safety risks exist in case of the safety and security of EUR staff and students may be at stake and invoke the responsibility of the university for its employees and the participants in study-abroad programmes (including PhD candidates). This includes for example risks involved in traveling to or fieldwork in high-risk areas or personal risks involved in working with specific partners, procedures or technologies. If the safety risks of a collaboration are unidimensional in the sense that they only relate to safety, the protocols for (international) travel and integral security are guiding, and there is no specific role for the ACSC.

The concrete questions to be answered are primarily targeting the context in which the partner operates; in some cases, it is more adequate to answer them at the level of the partner

³ This might become a separate risk category in a future version of the model.

⁴ <https://www.nwo.nl/en/knowledge-security>

institution or even a specific project, for example when that project directly involves practices that could compromise human rights or EUR's fundamental values.

Below is a list of concrete questions to be answered in order to identify the relevant risks that may be inherent in the collaboration. These questions primarily relate to the broader context in which the partner operates; in some cases, however, it may be more adequate to answer them at the level of the partner institution or even of a specific project, for example when that project directly involves practices that could compromise human rights or EUR's fundamental values.

For the risks identified, an assessment will need to be made of the likelihood of the realization of the risk on the one hand, and the severity of the risk on the other. On this basis, a risk matrix can be made that shows which negative impacts are most substantial and should be prioritized. Relevant process elements include verifying the risks, explaining the matrix assessment, including stakeholders' advice, and ensuring transparency.⁵

Risk identification questions:

<p>Human rights risks</p> <p>Which civil and political rights are at risk? Which economic, social and cultural rights are at risk? Which humanitarian issues are pertinent to the situation?</p>
<p>Risks of compromising EUR values</p> <p>To what degree is academic freedom of EUR, our partners, or others at risk? To what degree is EUR's commitment to global citizenship at risk? To what degree is EUR's commitment to sustainability at risk? To what degree is EUR's commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion at risk?</p>
<p>Knowledge Security risks</p> <p>What – if any – are the knowledge security risks involved? What kind of knowledge or technology could be transferred and to whom? Is the knowledge exchanged subject to formal export control regimes or bans? What covert influence could be exerted?</p>
<p>Safety risks</p> <p>What – if any – are the safety risks for EUR staff and (PhD) students? Which travel and fieldwork risks are involved? Which risks are involved related to knowledge, technologies or procedures?</p>

⁵ See an example (in Dutch) here: <https://www.ser.nl/nl/thema/imvo/duo-diligence/2/45>

Risk assessment questions:

Likelihood

How probable is it that the risk will be realized?

Answers may range from highly unlikely to unlikely to possible, to likely to very likely.

Severity

How serious would the impact be if the risk were to be realized, taking into account the nature of the harm, its scale and scope, its gravity and its irreversibility?

Answers may range from no impact to minor to medium to major to extensive.

Assessment information sources

Human rights
Ambtsberichten: https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten (query “Ambtsbericht”)
Human Rights Index: https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/human-rights-index-vdem
Human Rights details: UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHTS INDEX (ohchr.org)
Human Rights Watch www.hrw.org
Political / civil rights: https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world
Armed Conflict: https://ucdp.uu.se/year/2023 https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker https://geneva-academy.ch/galleries/today-s-armed-conflicts ACLED (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data) (acleddata.com)
Formal statements by e.g., European Commission, International Court of Justice, ...
Humanitarian rights www.unocha.org www.icrc.org
EUR values
Academic Freedom: https://academic-freedom-index.net/
Sustainability index: https://dashboards.sdgindex.org/map
Erasmian values: https://www.eur.nl/en/about-eur/strategy-2024/about-strategy-2024/erasmian-values
IDEA-values https://www.eur.nl/en/about-eur/vision/idea-center/vision-and-values
Declarations / statements from local and international academic associations
EUR Strategy documents regarding values
Knowledge Security
Advisors at EUR: integralsafety@eur.nl
National desk: https://www.loketkennisveiligheid.nl/
Dutch regulations: https://www.belastingdienst.nl/wps/wcm/connect/bldcontenten/belastingdienst/customs/safety_health_economy_and_environment/cdiu_cluster/strategic_goods/strategic_goods
EU sanctions: https://www.sanctionsmap.eu
Safety
International Office: Internationaloffice@eur.nl
Travel advice: https://www.nederlandwereldwijd.nl/reisadvies
Travel advice: www.travelbans.org

Examples

The examples here do not constitute a full assessment or formal advice. They are fictional and hypothetical and are intended to show what a nuanced assessment could look like. A full assessment might uncover other or additional information that would result in different advice.

Example 1: Foreign partner university and facial recognition technologies

Risk assessment for collaboration with a university in a country known for low academic freedom and frequent human rights violations on facial recognition technologies could reveal a general risk in the areas of knowledge security and human rights because these technologies could be used for policing minorities and therefore lead to human rights violations. Whether the specific university should be considered a high-risk partner will be assessed under the rubric of 'connection to the risk'. The risk assessment could show there are no relevant EU sanctions (https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-union-sanctions_en) but US sanctions explicitly mention surveillance technologies (<https://uhrp.org/sanctions-tracker/>). Covert influencing may be an increased risk especially when students or PhD-candidates from this country are involved in the project. No specific safety risks may show up in the assessment. Finally, EUR's positive societal impact and the value of global citizenship may be at stake if indeed the collaboration is linked to human rights violations.

Example 2: Research collaboration with tobacco industry

Risk assessment for collaboration with an industrial sector, in this case tobacco industry, could include knowledge security and safety aspects. Whether human rights are at stake may depend on concrete collaboration issues, although advocates against the tobacco industry claim inherent human rights issues (<https://ash.org/human-rights/>). The most prominent questions may relate to EUR values like positive societal impact and sustainability. Specific norms for collaboration with non-academic partners may need to be made explicit.

Example 3: Student exchange with a partner university in an unfree region

Risk assessment for student exchange with a university catering to an ethnic minority in an unfree region might primarily focus on safety issues given the situation. For that reason, alignment with formal travel regulations and governmental travel advice will be guiding. Knowledge security may not be a pertinent issue. Human rights (especially around political and civil liberties), and EUR values like academic freedom and global citizenship are relevant for the assessment, but probably in a positive sense: student exchange in this case may actually contribute positively. The assessment could consider that while physical travel to this region may not be possible, facilitating students to engage in online exchange or cooperation might be positive.

2. Who is our partner?

The second set of questions looks at what we know about the partner organization EUR is (or considers) collaborating with. As part of due diligence responsibilities, the university and its scholars will need to know the extent to which partners are involved in or responding to activities, practices, or situations that involve serious risks, as identified above. The objective of these questions is not to formulate a moral judgement about the partner, but to enable an assessment of the extent to which the values guiding the partner's activities and our own values diverge and what that means for the collaboration.

The partner assessment will focus on four main areas:

Track record in human rights and fundamental values: This refers to the performance and reputation of the partner over time and across domains, notably linked to human rights and (potentially divergent) fundamental values. The assessment includes concrete practices and formal procedures, as well as the scholarly work done by the university in these domains. Congruency between scholarly work and institutional policies is an important marker. If for example a university has a strong reputation in research on human rights but is consistently engaged in questionable practices. Similarly, if a research organization scores high on ecological sustainability but low on fundamental rights of indigenous populations, that combination may still be assessed as a problematic track record.

Track record in inclusion of marginalized groups: As academic institutes are also communities of scholarly practice where epistemic justice is an indicator of ethical credibility, the inclusion or exclusion of marginalized groups is a case in point. The concrete meaning will depend on the specific context and risk identified above, but the term 'marginalized groups' can at least refer to those who are moved to the peripheries, when considered from the central position of the institute. In other cases, it may include minorities or communities severely affected by the risk identified above, like indigenous communities affected by environmental damage.

Science for diplomacy: In a narrow sense, science for diplomacy refers to the use of science as a soft power to advance diplomatic objectives, e.g., for building bridges between communities and for creating good will on which diplomatic relations can be built.⁶ In a broader sense, relevant to this assessment model, it also refers to the question whether the partner puts its scholarly endeavors at the service of overcoming misunderstandings, resolving conflicts and building bridges between groups and societies with opposing interests in relation to the risks identified above. One example of solid work in this spirit are the reports by International Crisis Group.

Formal and informal viewpoints: This relates to the communications of the partner and its representatives about the issues addressed in this assessment. Informal viewpoints are limited to those expressed by or not contradicted by formal representatives. These can be relevant to the degree that they indicate an underlying culture and/or contribute to the (societal) conflict pertinent to the risk identified above. If an individual member of the partner expresses problematic viewpoints which the formal representatives don't support or condone, this is not considered pertinent to the assessment of the institution.

⁶ Other dimensions of science diplomacy are the use of diplomacy to support scientific collaboration and the use of scientific research to inform and support decision making in foreign and security policies. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/what-science-diplomacy_en

As a rule, the Dutch government, the EU, and UN-entities are a priori approved partners. That does not imply that working with another party through one of these will automatically receive a positive advice. It also does not imply that every project with one of these partners will automatically receive a positive advice. In cases of collaboration with these partners, the assessment will be on project-level and not on partner-level.

Partner assessment questions

Track record human rights

How has the partner promoted or undermined human rights in its formal procedures?
How has the partner secured or violated human rights in its practices?
What is the institution's scholarly reputation regarding human rights and fundamental values?
How does the partner act in the concrete conflict or issue at hand?

Track record inclusion or exclusion

How has the partner systematically included or excluded students or colleagues from marginalized groups?
How has the partner included, promoted and protected marginalized groups?
How is epistemic justice safeguarded through for example indigenous voices?

Science for diplomacy

To what extent does the partner collaborate with scholarly partners in marginalized communities?
Does the partner take responsibility for building bridges?

Formal and informal viewpoints

What are the formal views regarding the risk identified?
How does this materialize in mission and vision, strategy, and policies?
What informal views are expressed and supported regarding the risk?

Assessment information sources

Track record human rights

Information from the partner (website, brochures, ...)

Academic literature

Expert analysis, such as [Int'l Crisis Group](#)

<https://kennisbankterrorisme.nctv.nl/organisaties/hamas>

<https://kennisbankterrorisme.nctv.nl/organisaties>

Concluding observations by UN Treaty Bodies and inter-governmental agencies

Track record inclusion or exclusion

Information from the partner

Independent news coverage and analysis

Science for diplomacy

Information from the partner

Information about the partner from local and international NGOs

Formal and informal viewpoints

Public statements from the university

Declarations and alliances the university is part of

Procedures and (ethical) committees in place at the partner.

News coverage

Examples

The examples here do not constitute a full assessment or formal advice. They are fictional and hypothetical and are intended to show what a nuanced assessment could look like. A full assessment might uncover other or additional information that would result in different advice.

Example 1: Foreign partner university and facial recognition technologies

The (fictional) partner university to be assessed has published formal statements about human rights, claiming that fundamental human rights must be understood in culturally specific ways and should not be invoked against the interests of the state and culture. While this is potentially a warning sign for the assessment, the university also has specific measures in place to support and protect minorities. The project furthermore includes several researchers belonging to these minorities and the aims of the project are in fact to develop technologies that offer better protection of privacy and avoidance of racial bias. Human rights organizations and journalists have mentioned the university occasionally as a positive example, although there are also critical reports about discriminatory speeches by the senior leadership of the university. For the ACSC assessment, this might lead to a mixed conclusion on this dimension.

Example 2: Research collaboration with tobacco industry

The (fictional) tobacco company is looking for academic partners to develop more sustainable and environmentally friendly production methods that contribute positively to the livelihood and economic security of their producers. The company is in the process of transitioning to more responsible production. There are no signs that vulnerable populations (including their producers in fragile economies) are included in the decision making or in developing more sustainable strategies. Moreover, the company is criticized by NGOs as targeting vulnerable populations as new markets for their products. For this dimension, the assessment might be mostly negative, given the fact that the negative impact on consumers and the non-inclusion of producers outweigh the positive intentions toward producers, making it potentially an example of sheer greenwashing.

Example 3: Student exchange with partner university in an unfree region

The (fictional) partner university is suffering substantially from the compromised humanitarian and human rights situation and highly restrictive policies being imposed upon it. The university presents itself as a beacon of human rights with a strong focus on minorities' rights. Incidentally, individual scholars and students express support for organizations that are formally classified as 'terroristic organizations' by Dutch and other Western intelligence units.⁷ These incidental expressions are regularly mentioned in pro-state media as proof of a radical culture at the university, although such viewpoints are neither formally shared nor disputed by the senior leadership of the university. The university is carefully navigating its precarious position. The assessment in this dimension might be mostly positive.

⁷ <https://kennisbankterrorisme.nctv.nl/organisaties/>

3. What is the chain of connections to the risk?

One of the crucial aspects in the assessment model is the chain of connections to the risk.⁸ This term is used here to describe the varying degrees to which EUR and its partners are involved in the risk identified and thereby the degree to which a specific collaboration can be linked to, for example, human rights violation or environmental destruction. This is not only a matter of concrete actions and interactions between the partner and its constituents and/or other societal stakeholders (individual or institutionalized), but also of more systemic or structural aspects involving links to direct perpetrators of violations. The chain of connections looks at the partner's direct involvement in the risk, the partner's involvement through the larger (state) system, the involvement of the specific collaboration, and the involvement of Erasmus University. Together, these form a chain of connections that helps to differentiate between kinds and degrees of involvement. The intensity of the connection to the risk throughout the chain, combined with the likelihood and severity of the risk, determine the responsibility of EUR and the pertinent actions.

The chain of connections assessment will focus on four main areas:

The direct involvement of the partner in the risks identified: This refers to indications that the partner may be directly involved in practices that lead to the identified risks, such as human rights violations or environmental damage. An institute that is actively involved in the development of technology used for oppression of minorities or for unsustainable mining activities scores higher on the connection to the risk than an institute that is active in disciplines not directly pertinent to the risk. This assessment can be made on the level of the whole institute or of the specific unit that is intended in the collaboration.

The structural entanglement of the partner: This refers to the institutional autonomy of the partner in the context of high risks (of e.g., human rights violations) or – conversely – the degree to which the partner is de jure or de facto so strongly dictated by the state or non-state actors that it can in fact be considered a proxy for that state or non-state actor. This is not just a matter of financial or legal conditions determined by the state or non-state actors. It asks whether the partner enjoys sufficient academic freedom to take independent and critical positions. When that is not the case, the chance of connection to the risk through collaboration increases.

The pertinence of the specific collaboration for the risk identified: The chain of connection to the risk is more problematic if the specific collaboration regards knowledge and technology that can be used by parties in ways that exacerbate the risk identified. This includes dual use in a military context, but it can also refer to research in the field of for example law or social psychology that can be used by autocratic regimes or exploitative business models.

The degree of connection of EUR: To what degree is EUR connected through the partner to the risks identified? Three levels of connection to the risk can be distinguished. The strongest connection is when EUR through its own (planned) activities in the collaboration would cause risk of for example human rights violations or environmental damage. The second level is when EUR contributes to, facilitates, legitimizes, or incentivizes these risks, for example by providing content or possibilities for the risk-related actions on the partner's side. The third level is when negative impact is linked to EUR activities through the collaboration partner.

⁸ Sometimes called 'complicity', a term we avoid because of its legal implications and because there can also be a responsibility for indirectly contributing to the risks.

Chain of connection assessment questions

Direct involvement

Is the partner directly involved in relevant risks, like human rights violations or environmental damage?

Is the partner indirectly involved in relevant risks, like human rights violations or environmental damage?

Structural entanglement

To what degree is the partner entangled with state or non-state actors?

How free is the partner to take a critical stance?

How free are individuals within the institution to take a critical stance?

How does the partner collaborate with the state, the army and / or non-state actors including corporate business?

Risk of the specific collaboration

Does the specific existing or intended collaboration contribute in any way to increased risks?

Does the partner act concretely to mitigate the risk of human rights violations or environmental damage?

What are possible unintended effects of the collaboration?

Responsibility EUR

Does EUR through its (planned) activities cause the risks?

Does EUR contribute to the risks together with its partner?

Does EUR facilitate the partner to undertake activities that cause the risks?

Does EUR unduly legitimize the partner to undertake activities that cause the risks?

Are the risks otherwise linked to EUR and its activities through the collaboration with the partner?

Does collaboration with EUR grant reputational gains to the partner allowing the partner financial or operational benefits leading to increased risks?

Assessment information sources

Direct involvement

Reports from independent observers and news coverage

Structural entanglement

Publicly available information about governance

Index of Academic Freedom

Specific info on defense related universities in different countries

Specific info on defense related universities in China and Russia: Sensitive Technology Research and Affiliations of Concern <https://science.gc.ca/site/science/en/safeguarding-your-research/guidelines-and-tools-implement-research-security/sensitive-technology-research-and-affiliations-concern>

Risk of the specific collaboration

Reports from observers and news coverage

UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights

Objective, scope and methods of the specific collaboration

Responsibility EUR

Project documents

Contracts / MoUs between EUR and the partner university (human rights clause?)

Examples:

The examples here do not constitute a full assessment or formal advice. They are fictional and hypothetical and are intended to show what a nuanced assessment could look like. A full assessment might uncover other or additional information that would result in different advice.

Example 1: Foreign partner university and facial recognition technologies

There are no clear indications that the (fictional) partner university is directly or indirectly involved in human rights violations. However, independent international sources suggest a high risk of entanglement with the government and army. This is consistent with the formal remarks about human rights vis-a-vis state interests and the discriminatory remarks made by the senior leadership. It is not clear whether the university is free to take a critical stance. The connection to the risk for EUR would be mostly indirect. Collaboration would not cause the partner university to engage in the risks, but it may facilitate the partner through access to technologies and unduly legitimize the partner through the international partnership. Altogether, this might lead to a negative assessment in this dimension.

Example 2: Research collaboration with tobacco industry

The (fictional) tobacco company is most probably directly and indirectly involved in practices detrimental to human health and the environment, possibly amounting to human rights violations. There are some strategic steps taken to improve a positive impact and the specific collaboration partnership might support those positive developments. Although this collaboration would not imply that EUR causes or facilitates the risks that were identified, it could unduly legitimize the company in continuing its overall policies by validating its greenwashing activities. Altogether, this might lead to a negative assessment in this dimension.

Example 3: Student exchange with partner university in an unfree region

The (fictional) partner university is neither entangled with the state or the military forces, nor does the university seem to be entangled with non-state actors categorized as a terrorist organization. The university takes a critical position to the state and explicitly aims to support human rights. The collaboration (student exchange) is not directly related to the risks of human rights violations that are pertinent to the context. Collaboration would not cause, facilitate or legitimize the partner university to engage in human rights violations. Altogether, this might lead to a positive assessment in this dimension.

4. What is the effect of our actions?

The last set of questions takes a consequentialist or utilitarian approach to moral reasoning. It asks about the direct and indirect positive and negative impact on the level of society and on the level of academic relevance. This does not suggest that the ends always justify the means. It rather states that, for a balanced assessment, the consequences or effects of our actions should also be considered. If the warning signs of previous questions are limited and the positive societal and academic impact is high, the assessment will be more positive than when it is the other way around.

The effect assessment will focus on three main areas:

Direct societal impact: This refers to the direct effects and consequences of activities, programmes, or projects that are part of the collaboration with a partner. Examples of positive societal impact in research collaboration are improvements in the quality of life, economic conditions, or environmental sustainability. Negative societal impact can include environmental damage, stigmatizing or discriminatory measures or societal conflict resulting from a project. In the case of student exchange programmes, direct positive impact can include the learning opportunities for students and the encounter between cultures, while negative societal impact can for example be the exploitative effects of exposing vulnerable populations to the intrusion of unprepared students. The assessment of direct societal impact should be part of any ethical screening of (research) projects, but it is more pertinent in the case of sensitive collaborations.

Indirect societal impact: This refers to the consequences that are not immediately visible or not directly related to the collaboration but could have a long-term and structural influence that needs to be considered. This can for example be the empowerment of marginalized groups (positive) or the development of technologies that can be used in detrimental ways (negative). The assessment includes the question whether and how a specific collaboration influences power dynamics in a sensitive context and, if so, whether that conforms to fundamental values including equity and sustainability.

Academic relevance: This refers to the importance of the collaboration for the advancement of knowledge, more specifically in the scholarly or educational domain. Although every academic collaboration may be expected to be academically relevant in some way, there are varying degrees in which this is the case. An important question in the context of sensitive collaborations is therefore what would be lost if a specific collaboration cannot take place, and/or whether the same might be achieved in a less sensitive collaboration. As academic advancement in collaboration often benefits from long standing relationships between scholars and between institutions, another question would be how a possible suspension or termination of collaboration would affect the relationship and whether this would cause long-term harm.

Effect assessment questions

Direct Societal Impact

What is the direct societal impact of the project?
Which groups would benefit, and which groups would suffer from it?
How does the project impact environmental sustainability, human rights, and other values?

Indirect Societal Impact

What is the indirect societal impact of the collaboration?
How does the collaboration influence power dynamics?
Does the indirect impact conform to EUR values?
How does the collaboration affect the financial or reputational status of partners?
What are the effects of the collaboration on the reputation of EUR stakeholders?
Can the collaboration have positive/negative implications on its participants after the conclusion of the partnership?

Academic Relevance

What is the academic relevance of the collaboration?
Are there alternative collaboration partners in less sensitive contexts?
What is the impact of suspension or termination on long-term academic relationships?

Assessment information sources:

Direct Societal Impact

Documentation from the EUR scholars and partners
Documentation from local / international NGOs

Indirect Societal Impact

Documentation from the EUR scholars and partners
Documentation from local / international NGOs

Academic Relevance

Project descriptions and information from EUR partners

Examples

The examples here do not constitute a full assessment or formal advice. They are fictional and hypothetical and are intended to show what a nuanced assessment could look like. A full assessment might uncover other or additional information that would result in different advice.

Example 1: Foreign partner university and facial recognition technologies

The direct societal impact of collaboration is claimed to be positive given the intention to develop technologies that better safeguard privacy and avoid racial bias. This claim is, however, contested given the partner's track record. Vulnerable groups like minorities might be negatively affected if the collaboration is successful. Contrary to the EUR researchers' intentions and values, the project might benefit state actors and corporate business at the expense of individuals. As there may be other potential partners in less problematic contexts and with a better track record, the researchers may be advised not to engage in this partnership but seek alternative partners for the intended research.

Example 2: Research collaboration with tobacco industry

The direct societal effect may be ambivalent. There can be a positive effect in developing more sustainable production processes, but the social effects for vulnerable populations may be negative. The greenwashing risk further constituted a negative indirect societal effect. The academic relevance of the project seems limited, especially because the project does not aim for an integral improvement of sustainability but only focuses on environmental sustainability, without attention for social sustainability. There is furthermore no specific reason why partnerships in this sector need to be maintained. Altogether, the researcher may be advised to refrain from this collaboration.

Example 3: Student exchange with partner university in an unfree region

The direct societal effect of student exchange may be limited. While traveling has negative environmental effects, online connections can positively affect the students from both universities participating in the exchange. Indirect societal effects can be the strengthening of the reputation of the partner university. Based on a positive assessment of the partner university's track record, this indirect societal effect can also be seen as positive. The short-term academic relevance is limited to the participants' learning experience. The negative effect of terminating or suspending the partnership could be long-term. Altogether, the effect-assessment could be neutral to positive, and the advice could be to continue the partnership and find ways of exchange and encounter that do not involve traveling at this point in time.

Secondary questions

The assessment on the four dimensions described above can result in a positive or provisional negative advice. In the latter case, three further questions need to be answered for the committee to arrive at a well-reasoned and final advice.

1. *What are the legal implications of (termination of) collaboration?*

Legal implications of the university regard the responsibilities, obligations, and risks that follow from partnerships with other organizations. These include not only the contractual obligations of the specific partnership that has been assessed. It also relates to, for example, the subsidy conditions pertaining to national and European grants where the partnerships cannot just be terminated. Similarly, there may be cases where termination of a partnership may have implications for other partnerships, e.g., with universities in the USA that are bound by the *Anti-Boycott Law*, which may indirectly affect EUR. Other legal implications of partnerships and the termination thereof may regard intellectual property, privacy and data protection, liability, supply chain responsibility and responsible business conduct, accreditation, and so on. While these legal implications don't determine the content of the advice, they may define when, how, and to what extent an advisable course of action can be taken.

2. *What are the reputational implications of (termination of) collaboration?*

Reputational implications are the potential consequences for the reputation of the university. A differentiation can be made between the academic reputation and the societal reputation. The reputational implications can also be weighed differently for different parts of the organization. For the medical faculty, for example, the societal reputation of the academic hospital as an absolutely neutral organization is crucial, whereas some other parts of the university have an outspoken societal reputation. Reputational implications may also relate to long-term consequences of a partnership for the university, units within the university, or even staff and students, especially given the fact that there will almost always be traces of such a partnership that can be found long after the collaboration has ended. Whether or not the reputational implications should weigh in on the final decision will be considered and made explicit by the ACSC, but the ultimate decision is with the university leadership.

3. *Can conditions be set for the collaboration that would address the concerns expressed in the provisional advice?*

When the assessment leads to negative or ambivalent advice, the question arises whether conditions can be suggested that reduce the risks and prevent negative outcomes from happening. These suggested conditions can include changes to the original plan of collaboration, changes to the scope or the intended methods, inclusion of additional or alternative partners. They can also consist of strict regulatory procedures, explicit contracts, monitoring of compliance, data management and intellectual property clauses, and explicit procedures for evaluation and escalation. Explicit exit strategies, such as a human rights or environmental harms clause in partnership contracts can also be considered. If such conditions are deemed to limit the risks of the collaboration adequately, this may reverse the negative advice into a positive one, provided that the conditions are met.

Appendix 1: Source Classification

To answer the questions in the assessment model, information will be obtained from a range of sources. These will obviously vary in degrees of objectivity, reliability, relevance, and quality of content. Therefore, all sources will be assessed on the dimensions mentioned below. This does not rule out sources a priori. It is possible, for example, that sources are biased, but nonetheless signal important information. That information can then be used, but the bias should be taken into account when interpreting the source.

The following categories of sources can be expected to yield meaningful information:

1. Information provided by the EUR scholars involved and their (intended) collaborators
2. Formal reports by national and international government entities
3. Research reports by experts and independent NGOs
4. Consistent and independent news coverage
5. Documents produced by the partner organisation
6. Information provided by human rights and environmental organisations

The first category provides the concrete inside knowledge about the collaboration, its aims and methods, and the specific context of both partners. The ACSC will develop an instrument to support the scholars in making their own assessments and in collecting the information needed for an assessment by the committee. Categories 2 to 4 can be expected to yield mostly impartial and objective information, although this will need to be assessed for individual sources. Categories 5 and 6 are likely to be more biased, but that does not make the information irrelevant.

The assessment of the sources will look at:

Author and Expertise

- **1:** The author is unknown or has no relevant expertise.
- **2:** The author has limited relevant expertise or experience.
- **3:** The author has some relevant expertise and experience.
- **4:** The author is a recognized expert in the field.
- **5:** The author is a leading authority in the field, with extensive publications and recognition.

Source and Publication

- **1:** The source is an unknown or unreliable publication (e.g. a personal blog without references).
- **2:** The source is a lesser-known publication with a questionable reputation.
- **3:** The source is a reasonably reliable publication, but without rigorous peer review.
- **4:** The source is a reputable peer-reviewed publication (e.g. a scientific journal).
- **5:** The source is a top-tier, highly respected publication with rigorous peer review processes.

References and Evidence

- **1:** No references or evidence provided.
- **2:** There are some references, but they are limited or unreliable.
- **3:** There are plenty of references, but not all of them are directly relevant or recent.
- **4:** There are extensive and relevant references that are largely up to date.

- **5:** There is an extensive number of highly relevant and recent references, and the evidence is solid and well-researched.

Current affairs

- **1:** The information is outdated and no longer relevant.
- **2:** The information is somewhat outdated, with limited relevance.
- **3:** The information is fairly recent and largely relevant.
- **4:** The information is current and very relevant.
- **5:** The information is societally urgent and directly relevant to the current context.

Impartiality

- **1:** The source is totally biased and distorts information.
- **2:** The source is strongly biased and uses information very selectively.
- **3:** The source is biased but offers relevant though one-sided information.
- **4:** The source is opinionated but fair in representing different sides.
- **5:** The source is impartial and balanced in using information.

For sources to be acceptable, all dimensions must score 3 or higher. If there is a deviation from the above source qualification model, this must be justified. Source classification will be tracked in a dedicated Excel spreadsheet.