Universiteit van Amsterdam

Summary University Forum

University Collaboration with the Defence and Police Sector

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Introduction

International tensions are rising, and governments are investing heavily in creating a safe and resilient society. This is not without consequence for universities. They will increasingly be faced with potential opportunities for collaboration with government agencies within the defence and police sector. But how do you shape such a collaboration as an independent and socially engaged university? Does academic freedom imply that any type of collaboration with this sector is permissible? And if not, what are the boundaries and who determines these? How do you prevent the misuse of scientific knowledge, and thus the risk that the university becomes involved in human rights violations or war crimes?

Recently, the deans and Executive Board of the UvA formulated a statement concerning the collaboration with such partners, in the context of making the Netherlands more resilient and secure. You can read the statement here. Independently, though with knowledge of this statement, the University Forum, an initiative that brings together students and staff twice a year to discuss pressing issues facing the university, organized an evening dedicated to the topic and related questions. The event was attended by Members of the executive board, as well as faculty deans. Participants were randomly drawn from students and employees of the UvA.

After a plenary introduction to the theme by the interim chair, Niels Graaf (Assistant Professor Constitutional Law), and a guest speaker, Lonneke Peperkamp (Professor of Military Ethics and Leadership at the Dutch Defence Academy and Radboud University), the attendees explored the two statements below in small groups. At the end of the evening, an open dialogue took place between all participants. The main outcomes of the group discussions and the plenary discussion are summarised in this report.

Statements

1. Every government agency, including the defence and police sector, should be examined within universities.
2. Academic research on the defence and police sector cannot be conducted (adequately) without cooperation from these government agencies.

Research into the defence and police sector

The majority of participants agreed that it is appropriate for the university to conduct research into all government agencies; defence and police are no exception to this. This is because universities possess the necessary knowledge and resources to critically assess and study precisely these types of agencies, which some consider controversial. Nevertheless, opinions differed on the extent to which research into – all – government agencies should be mandatory for universities. The majority of the group believed that the university, as an independent body, should have the freedom to investigate all government agencies, but that this also includes the freedom to refrain from conducting such research. A few felt, in this regard, that critical research into the defence and police sector might be a task better suited to independent journalism.

Other participants argued that universities, in fact, do have a social responsibility to critically examine and study powerful government agencies such as the defence and police sector. At the same time, many participants emphasised that it would be inefficient to assign such a research task to all Dutch universities. Financial considerations suggest that only a select number of universities should be designated, based on their expertise, to conduct this research.

The opinions were divided on the question of whether academic research into government agencies such as the Ministry of Defence and the police is only possible if the university collaborates with these bodies. Many participants argued that collaboration can facilitate data collection, but that the university must ensure that such research remains independent and transparent. Some participants also felt that it was desirable to retain the option of conducting research on certain topics (such as critical analyses of this sector) without collaboration.

Challenges relating to university collaboration with the defence and police sector

Opinions varied with regards to the broader topic of university collaboration with the defence and police sector. Some participants viewed this collaboration positively, whilst others were more concerned about the risks and ethical dilemmas it would bring. Attendees in this latter group emphasised the following issues during the dialogue:

1. *Scientific independence and academic freedom*

Many attendees argued that receiving funding from the defence and police sector – e.g., the Ministry of Defence or companies in the defence industry – could pose risks to the university in terms of scientific independence and academic freedom. After all, financial dependence on external parties such as these, and the possibility of financial repercussions when researchers do not adhere to the wishes or perspectives of the grantor, could influence scientific research, -questions, and -output. This is relevant in light of the participants' earlier conclusions that the university could take up an important role in critically questioning and examining the defence and police sector. Other participants did, however, point out that risks of this kind are always present with external funding and that, regardless of the source, external funding therefore always requires critical assessment.

Therefore, the attendees argued in favour of defending academic freedom and scientific independence; research and its output should (always) remain independent, regardless of whether the research is an examination of- or in collaboration with government agencies such as the Ministry of Defence and the police. Furthermore, the university must retain the freedom to decide whether or not to enter into such collaborations.

2. *"Dual use" and involvement in military conflicts*

Within the University of Amsterdam, a profoundly international environment, there are many students and employees who have been directly or indirectly affected by military conflicts. For them, collaboration with the defence industry can be a particularly sensitive issue. Furthermore, many participants, including both students and staff, have made it clear that they refuse to contribute to the development of knowledge that could be used, directly or indirectly, to inflict violence and/or commit human rights violations. The latter also reflects one of the UvA's guiding principles on this issue.

There is a risk, however, that research carried out in collaboration with partners such as the Ministry of Defence and the defence industry could result in university research, -knowledge and -expertise being used for military purposes, regardless of the researcher's original intentions (also known as 'dual use'). For this reason, many students and staff question the collaborations between the university and the defence and police sector.

3. *Transparency and normalisation of controversial actors*

Transparency is essential for safeguarding scientific independence and academic freedom. In light of this, a number of attendees expressed concern about the fact that data originating from the defence industry is not always publicly accessible. They suggested, for instance, that if research data or results cannot be publicly shared, it is impossible to carry out an ethical review of collaborations between the university and this sector. Some participants therefore questioned whether it is desirable to enter into these collaborations when certain research data cannot be published. Research dealing with such data should rather be entrusted to other actors.

Is collaboration desirable?

The above-mentioned issues led a small group of participants to raise objections to university collaboration with the defence and police sector. At the same time, some of them felt that the university should continue to (critically) study, question and/or observe these government organisations.

However, a majority of the participants felt that completely avoiding collaboration with the defence and police sector is not desirable nor efficient. Some even argued that collaboration should be viewed as something positive. In this way, collaboration could give the university a clearer understanding of the defence and police sector. Other attendees believed that it would, in fact, be unethical for the university not to cooperate with the defence and police sector. Amongst those in

favour of collaboration, there was agreement that successful collaboration is not possible without stringent conditions that guarantee the university's independence.

Terms of collaboration

In order to prevent any negative effects of university collaboration with the defence and police sector on academic research, various arguments and/or proposals were put forward:

1. *Scientific independence, academic freedom and transparency*

The need to safeguard the university's scientific independence and academic freedom was repeatedly emphasised during the evening. As noted earlier, many participants expressed concern over the risks associated with conducting research into- and collaborating with the defence and police sector, particularly regarding excessive financial dependence on, for example, the Ministry of Defence.

To ensure that the university remains free to determine what research it conducts and with whom it enters into partnerships, some participants suggested that the university should clearly identify what is required to achieve independent observation of the defence and police sector. This could involve: critically assessing data provided by this sector, and establishing clear agreements on transparency, funding and independence. All of the foregoing could be laid down in an ethical framework (see next point).

Other participants also expressed the value of investing in research relationships with independent third parties, such as NWO, rather than receiving funding directly from more controversial organisations such as the Ministry of Defence.

2. *Ethical framework*

In light of the foregoing, the attendees believed that the university should maintain a clear ethical framework that lays down shared ethics and core values with regards to university collaboration with the defence and police sector. Transparency and due diligence must be central to the framework. To this end, the UvA's current ethical framework for assessing collaborations with third parties may be applied – as is currently being done – provided that it continues to meet the key requirements described in this paragraph.

The ethical framework must clarify with whom the university, researchers and students are willing to collaborate; why such collaboration is necessary; what conditions must be met for such collaborative research to take place; and what form that research might take. The framework must also provide for an (ethical) assessment guide to evaluate collaborations with regards to underlying or latent objectives and potential unforeseen consequences. Such a framework could also include mutual agreements between the university and the defence and police sector. In any case, it is important that students and researchers retain the option to oppose and take action against militarisation and/or collaboration with this sector.

Some participants also expressed that the current approach to collaborations with external parties in general, whereby critical assessment is carried out only in exceptional cases, requires reconsideration and possible reformulation. An alternative would be a framework in which it is standard procedure to critically assess every collaboration and to enter into a partnership only if it demonstrably contributes to society and is in line with the university's core values.

3. Ethics in education

The university must include its ethical positions and frameworks more in education. During the evening, it became apparent that the level of attention paid to- and knowledge of ethical issues varies significantly between faculties. The participants therefore expressed the need to devote more attention to ethical issues in education across the university, so that knowledge is shared on a more equal footing and a more equal – and therefore more fruitful – dialogue can take place throughout the university. It was also emphasised that educating students on ethical issues such as these, equips them with knowledge about the implications of certain collaborations, which they can apply (and continue to apply) in their future research and professional lives.

Conclusion

During this edition of the University Forum participants reflected on university collaboration with the defence and police sector. Central to the discussion were two statements:

1. Every government agency, including the defence and police sector, should be examined within universities.
2. Academic research on the defence and police sector cannot be conducted (adequately) without cooperation from these government agencies.

Whilst there was no complete consensus, most participants emphasised that the university would need to or should enter into partnerships with the defence and police sector due to, among others its societal duty to create and disseminate knowledge, provided that a number of aforementioned conditions are met. However, they also expressed concerns about: the risks that such collaboration might pose to the academic freedom of the university and its staff and students; issues surrounding transparency; and the ethical dilemmas regarding 'dual use' and indirect involvement in military operations.

To mitigate these risks, a large number of participants suggested that the university should (continuously) consider ways in which scientific independence and academic freedom can be safeguarded. Moreover, the university must apply a clear ethical framework to ensure that collaborations with the defence and police sector are assessed in a meaningful way. Moreover, ethical values and issues such as these will need to be incorporated into education across the UvA.

Questions? Please contact the official secretary Nienke Booij.
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