



UNIVERSITEIT VAN AMSTERDAM



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University Forum

How do we prevent UvA-research having immoral implications via third parties?

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The university pays a lot of attention to integrity in scientific research. But besides the question of how to investigate, there are also the questions of what and with whom? Much less attention is usually paid to these questions. How to deal with partners who violate human rights? What if well-intentioned research is misused for immoral purposes? Is the researcher in some way responsible for what is done with research results? More and more universities are making policy in this area, including the UvA. The timing for a session of the University Forum could not have been better.

On December 1st, the University Forum discussed four questions related to these challenges:

1

Do scientists and the university retain a responsibility for the knowledge they generate, even over time? And do they therefore also have a responsibility to prevent their results from being used unethically by third parties?

2

Should we as a university go further in the moral requirements we place on the development and use of knowledge than the legal requirements?

3

Should science be aimed at improving the world?

4

Who is responsible for determining whether or not ethical objections to a collaboration with a third party are too great?

Guest speakers

Inge Lerouge

Inge Lerouge is head of Scientific Integrity and Ethics at KU Leuven. In Leuven they are already one step further in making policy on this theme. Inge spoke about this at the University Forum as a source of inspiration for our own policy. In Leuven, the responsibility lies primarily with the researcher, who receives extensive support in this regard. This is done through a special flow chart, among other things. At the center of the flow chart is the weighing of various factors, such as who the end user is and whether it is a sensitive subject. If in doubt, the researcher should go to the ethics committee, which issues a binding advice. Despite the fact that the responsibility lies primarily with the individual researcher, KU Leuven also draws hard boundaries. For example, no research is being conducted into offensive weapon systems. Collaborations with the military are not excluded a priori, but the priority is always given to civil applications.



Niek Brunsveld

Niek Brunsveld is a policy officer at the Academic Affairs department of the UvA. In addition to an outline of the underlying problems, Niek went into more detail about what is currently happening within the UvA in this area. He considered which challenges must be overcome and made proposals for possible guiding principles that could serve as a basis for later policy. According to Niek, there are already various regulations against the most extreme cases, such as the possibility of research being used for military purposes, but there is still a lack of policy for the cases in the gray area. The UvA must ask itself whether it wants to go further than the legal requirements and on the basis of which values can be considered when a specific research collaboration is justified or not.



Do scientists and the university retain a responsibility for the knowledge they generate, even over time? And do they therefore also have a responsibility to prevent their results from being used unethically by third parties?

For example: if a researcher investigates addiction on behalf of the GGD, does the researcher then have the responsibility to prevent the results from being misused later by, for example, the tobacco industry?

As a scientist you can have a major impact on the world through research, both in a positive and negative sense. It is expressly the researcher's responsibility to consider that impact, insofar as it can be foreseen in advance. The higher the Technology Readiness Level, the greater the overview of the possible impact of research, and the greater the responsibility to be vigilant about it. Not everything is permissible. As a university, we will have to set hard limits for research topics and partners where the immoral nature is not disputed by anyone. Preventing research from being used for the development of weapons (Dual Use) is a good example of this. A special ethics committee of experts should establish such hard limits, which could possibly go beyond the legal minimum. However, it is not desirable to impose additional restrictions on the researcher. Where the moral correctness of a collaboration or research project is a topic of discussion, the choice should always remain with the individual researcher. We must avoid self-censorship in research.

Furthermore, we cannot separate the question of responsibility from the practical questions. How can a researcher be responsible for any immoral use of his or her research if the researcher in question does not have the means to control this? There are two options in this area that are worth exploring further. First of all, a researcher could decide not to make the data freely accessible in addition to the publication, in order to maintain some control. This should be included in the discussions around Open Science. The second option is to take action as a researcher, where there are valid concerns, to warn and educate authorities that do have the ability to enforce. A fictional example is that if a researcher develops a new technique for facial recognition, then the researcher shares this equally with the national authority of personal data.

- ▶ **We have to draw hard boundaries as an organization, but within this the researcher must above all be as free as possible.**
- ▶ **The researcher is responsible to the extent that the impact can be foreseen in advance and he or she has some control over it.**

Should we as a university go further in the moral requirements we place on the development and use of knowledge than the legal requirements?

Suppose the government requests to cooperate in the development of a corona app with tracking software and the like. Do we agree as long as the legal requirements are met, or do we disagree due to our own far-reaching ethical objections?

There is only limited need to go beyond the legal requirements. If the UvA were to decide to do so, it could result in two contradictory things being expected of researchers. On the one hand, there is already the pressure to publish with open access, but another pressure is added to that to keep control over what may or may not be done with the research by third parties. The UvA should strike a balance between these two interests. There must be a clear framework within which the researcher can personally consider whether a specific research or research collaboration is justified. An ethics committee can advise, whereby consideration should be given as to whether it is not wise to call such a committee ad hoc and discipline-specific to handle a complex case.

- ▶ Researchers can find themselves in a balancing act between Open Science and preventing the immoral use of their research.
- ▶ Consider working with ad hoc discipline-specific ethics committees on a complex case.
- ▶ Furthermore, the responsibility must lie with the individual scientist as much as possible.

Should science be aimed at improving the world?

Should research that has a clear positive impact on the world outside the academy always be prioritized in funding over research with no concrete link to society or the environment?

Knowledge almost by definition already leads to a better world; a world we understand better. It may seem like there are questions we shouldn't want to ask ourselves, such as IQ and race, but it is precisely in those areas that science can play an important role in debunking prejudice. It is right that social interests are taken into account in the research agenda, but above all we should not let it become too important. After all, it is very difficult to oversee exactly what the social impact will be in the long term, especially for fundamental research. Academic curiosity, regardless of usefulness, is and will remain our most important motivation. Negative impact is undesirable, but can never be completely prevented, certainly not when Open Science will become much more common in the future.

- ▶ Also involve the discussions surrounding Open Science in this policy theme.
- ▶ Above all, we should not give too great a role to the social interest, because the impact of research is difficult to fully assess.
- ▶ Academic curiosity gets priority over social benefit.

Who is responsible for determining whether or not ethical objections to a collaboration with a third party are too great?

- What could any special ethics committee look like for this purpose? Are there other ways in which the UvA can support its researchers in this regard?
- How do you prevent that when a researcher decides not to cooperate in a doubtful case, a colleague subsequently agrees? How do you prevent researchers from being played off against each other?
- Can there be differences in ethical standards between different departments of the UvA?

The responsibility for weighing whether moral objections to a particular research or research collaboration must lie primarily with the directly involved scientist(s) and their supervisors. However, they should not be alone in this. As soon as there is any disagreement or doubt as to whether or not something is morally justified, there should be the option to have an ethical review carried out by a specially established committee. The starting point is support, not control.

There are several factors to take into account when designing such a committee. First of all, such a committee must be flexible and deployable quickly. Timing is very important in new research projects, especially when external funding plays a central role. We must avoid a bureaucratic bottleneck. Furthermore, a balance must be found in the composition between expertise in the relevant field and impartiality. Some distance from the research in question is a must, but that also applies to expertise in the research area concerned.

Finally, attention should be paid to the “integrity” of such a committee. For example, by including UvA students and delegations from other universities in the committee, moral principles can be prevented from being diluted when financial interests are stake. A concrete suggestion is to investigate in a VSNU context whether it is possible to “exchange” scientists on a rotating basis for the ethics committees. Because the committees make choices through their considerations that reflect the moral principles of the UvA, it is important that there is some democratic control over these committees. This can best be achieved through the right personnel composition.

- ▶ Researchers and their immediate supervisors are primarily responsible, but should not stand alone in the questionable cases.
- ▶ Ethics review committees can solve that problem, but the premise should continue to be “support, not monitoring”.
- ▶ The committees should not become a bureaucratic bottleneck.
- ▶ Make sure they have enough distance to be impartial. Involving students and staff from other institutions can help.
- ▶ The committees should be sensitive to democratic scrutiny.



Vragen? Neem dan contact op met secretaris
Roeland Voorbergen
universiteitsforum-bb@uva.nl