

Analysis of the participation meetings about international collaborations at Radboud University Nijmegen

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1. Introduction

In January 2025, five participation meetings were organised in which a total of 77 participants (48 staff and 29 students) from Radboud University Nijmegen discussed issues concerning the international collaborations of Radboud University. These meetings were part of a participation process designed to give staff and students a voice in the conversation on the subject taking place throughout the institution. In this report, we analyse the outcomes of these five meetings. This report will be shared with the Executive Board. The Board will then share it with the Advisory Committee on international collaborations (see below) and then also make it public. Below, we briefly outline the background to organising the participation meetings. We then describe the purpose and approach of the meetings, the dilemmas discussed during the meetings and various other insights and outcomes.

2. The background

Following Israel's incursion into Gaza in November 2023, there has been a major international outcry among students and staff from several universities about existing collaborations with research institutions in these areas, alleging that the universities are directly or indirectly contributing to the situation in Gaza. Others felt that a researcher's academic freedom should not be curtailed in such a way and that it is important to put academic freedom first, especially in countries or areas where human rights or other fundamental rights are violated. The discussion expanded towards collaborations with institutions in areas where conditions prevail that we do not subscribe to in the Netherlands. These range from violation of women's rights or restrictions on the freedom of expression, to human rights violations and active warfare.

This discussion also arose at Radboud University. In November 2024, an advisory committee on international collaborations was set up. One of its tasks was to review Radboud University's collaborations with universities in major conflict zones. In addition, a participation process was set up to give RU students and staff the opportunity to exchange views on the subject and to provide input to the Advisory Committee. This gives both staff and students the opportunity to talk to each other about this subject, and the sometimes strong views about this subject can be enriched by other perspectives that may not be heard so often. It is relevant for the Executive Board and the Advisory Committee to know what is going on throughout the academic community.

As a participatory part of this process, a series of meetings were organised where students and staff discussed the dilemmas posed by international collaborations and their possible limitation. This is input for the work of the Advisory Committee. This will be followed by a series of meetings and dialogue sessions that will delve deeper into the tensions that have arisen within the academic community at Radboud University in recent months in response to the situation in Gaza. These will focus on the dilemmas with respect to international collaborations that have arisen within certain groups of staff and students. The exact form of this second series will be determined later and will depend, among other things, on the insights gained during the first five meetings. The process will be independently set up and supervised by Radboud Reflects and Public Mediation.

3. The participation meetings

Five meetings were organised: two lunch meetings, two meetings at the end of the working day and one evening meeting. Two meetings were in Dutch, three in English. The meetings were led by Marcel Becker, Ethics Advisor at Radboud Reflects and Associate Professor of Philosophical Ethics and Political Philosophy. The aim of the meetings was to get an idea of the dilemmas together using concrete examples. This was not about participants expressing strong views, but rather the underlying arguments leading to particular standpoints. The conversation focused on the broad issues, not just the Israel-Gaza conflict. To that end, the question asked at the beginning of the meeting was: *What concrete dilemmas, tensions and/or problems do the international collaborations pose?*

To facilitate a good dialogue which could accommodate all the participants, the maximum number of participants was set at 25 per meeting. Four of the five meetings were sold out, although there were no-shows at all of them. The meetings were reasonably well attended, with 22, 14, 14, 15 and 12 participants, respectively. In total, slightly more staff than students attended. Participants' opinions differed on various issues. These were discussed respectfully with each other. Staff and students who were unable to attend one of the participation meetings could use an online form to give their input. 22 people took advantage of this option. This input is also incorporated in the analysis.

4. Analysis of the results

Many different topics were discussed during the meetings. Below we list the key dilemmas and themes that emerged from analysis of the 5 meetings. We do not therefore give an overall view of all the comments made, but discuss the common themes. These are given in random order.

4.1. General dilemmas regarding international collaborations

During the discussions, participants identified several dilemmas relating to international collaborations. We did not seek answers to the questions, or consensus regarding a position. The meetings were not about debate, but rather about listening to each other and thus gaining depth. The discussion of dilemmas below does not therefore provide unequivocal answers. However, it does offer insight into the questions, dilemmas and different opinions that exist within the academic community.

Are there limits to academic freedom?

Academic freedom is valuable. It is important to collaborate with as many academic bodies and scholars as possible. Only then can knowledge be increased. Political issues should not decide who can or cannot be collaborated with. Excluding researchers a priori (because of a political conflict) is not conducive to gathering more knowledge. Moreover, on such moral issues, some feel that a university should not follow the government but should make its own assessment.

At the same time, academic freedom is not absolute, and some emphasise that it carries responsibility. The pitfall of academic freedom is that it suggests that everyone is welcome and all opinions are allowed. The question then arises: what does academic freedom mean and what are its limits?

Examples of obvious violation of freedom cited: when it is not possible to perform truly objective and nuanced research because researchers are controlled by the government, are not allowed to draw certain conclusions, or parties are involved with a purely commercial purpose. Academic freedom also means being able to collaborate with someone working under (or not speaking out against) a problematic regime. Should academic freedom to collaborate with individuals of our own choosing be curtailed if those individuals have different opinions from our own? When are these other opinions divergent enough, what should they relate to?

In this respect, we raise the question: do we want a strict framework for every situation, or rather a broad framework that can accommodate tailor-made trade-offs? Should a university take a stand (strict framework), or instead allow for academic freedom and all opinions? Where does the space for academic freedom end and responsibility to adopt a position begin? Because the university teaches about ethical

issues, and because of its core values (see below), some feel that the university must take a stand.

Others question whether a university should be political, and whether there is room for individual researchers from countries that are excluded (the 'Olympic solution'; athletes do not compete in the Olympics on behalf of a country). Participants in the discussion emphasise that the difference between institutional links and individual collaborations should be clear. Academic freedom at the individual level does not stand in the way of breaking ties at the institute level. At the same time, collaboration often depends on large grants and thus institutional ties.

How can you accommodate nuance?

Some people within the academic community have strong views on the subject. However, there are also many people who take a more nuanced approach, and those who do not necessarily want to take a stand. Some of them experience that there is no room for "I don't know" or a more nuanced point of view: you have to be for or against. They feel there is too much focus on the loudest voice, while the loudest voice is not necessarily the ethically correct voice. They believe that the university should provide space for dialogue, discussion and argumentation, so that not only established views are given attention.

Some believe there should be an equal, uniform assessment of all situations (not double standards). Others believe that this is impossible, and customisation is necessary instead. For example, collaboration should not be assessed for an institute as a whole, but by faculty or research group. There are big differences between scientific fields and you want to avoid harming the 'good' collaborations. Moreover, many individuals will not subscribe to the line of the institute in question. You should carefully consider the consequences of ending a collaboration. Also, most universities in the world have to deal with the conditions of the country where they are located and have collaborations with government institutions. While some may be problematic, others may be very welcome and appropriate.

Participants consider the substance of the relevant collaboration relevant. Knowledge may be more or less politically charged and there may therefore be differences between disciplines as to whether collaboration is acceptable or not. Research on weapons is fraught, but research on chemotherapy is not. How the relevant institutions act is also important. Do they oppose (within their means) the regime we disapprove of, or do they support it? Some also think that the historical context and the role of the West in historical developments should be included in the consideration. The history of conflicts obviously determines the current situation, the distribution of rich and poor around the world, and the political situation in many areas.

Who do we want to collaborate with?

We should not only ask which institutions we *don't* want to collaborate with, but also who we *do* want to collaborate with. What bias is there in our collaborations and can we change it in a positive direction? In this way, we need to proactively and strategically explore what collaborations Radboud University wants to establish: where do you want to go, in what areas do you want to collaborate? This includes the question about the impact on the size of Radboud University if very critical choices are made. Does Radboud University then not risk becoming too small and insignificant, and in turn become too dependent on the Dutch government? Some argue that when considering collaborations, the decisive factor should not be finance, but (social) utility. This should also take into account the impact on the Dutch economy. The question is obviously how to measure such effects.

How can you promote certain values, and still remain inclusive?

It is important for the university to stand up for its (core) values. At the same time, we must ask ourselves to what extent we want to 'impose' our values and standards. It is important to remain welcoming and inclusive to everyone, including international students and international partners with different norms and values. This may be at odds with the values the university wants to stand for. Explicitly propagating certain values can also have the effect of (indirectly) excluding people, because any inclusion is also an exclusion. For example, actively promoting queer rights may result in institutions from Islamic countries no longer

wanting to work with us.

Another question in this context is: Is collaboration a legitimisation of the other's views?

Some people feel that if you collaborate with an institution, you thereby legitimise that other institution. And by legitimising an institution, you legitimise the regime that funds or houses that institution. Therefore, collaboration could only take place if the other party's regime reflects Radboud University's norms and values. That would mean that you could not collaborate with institutions in war zones, for example.

Related to this is the participants' strong desire for the university to take a stand. The university has a great moral responsibility; it occupies a crucial place in society with great influence on society. In its mission statement, the university testifies to this. It is therefore the university's responsibility to ensure that its partners are ethical. Collaborating parties must share the same ethical and moral views. That means that you cannot collaborate with countries that commit war crimes or genocide, or are actively condemned by international law.

It was suggested that a moral/ethical directive should be signed by both parties in every collaboration. Failure to sign or comply with the directive will result in unilateral termination of the collaboration.

Participants cautioned against setting hard limits that are commonly applied. There are so many problematic countries. If you put limits on collaboration, then there is almost no country you can collaborate with.

At the same time, many institutions in war zones, or the researchers working there, do not support the regime under which they fall or the ideas held by their country's government. The researchers themselves are often burdened by the regime in question and its consequences. Ending collaboration with them also ends collaboration with people who actually want change. Others therefore feel that this should not be a reason to end collaboration with these institutions and researchers. You would need to look at several things, such as: how critical is the institute; how much scope is there for staff or externals to be critical; and do the staff themselves think the links should be severed? And conversely: do others, as we are doing now, want to work with us? Knowledge of the local situation is indispensable.

Some people believe that putting pressure on the institutes will give individual researchers more power to speak out. Others argue that ending collaboration actually makes the situation more difficult for individual researchers in the countries concerned. They feel that the idea that you could exert influence through collaboration is naive.

Finally, also at issue is the safety and protection of individual students from countries whose regimes are now being criticised (e.g. China, Russia, Israel). They suffer from the situation and the questions and judgements from their environment regarding their origin. Questions about this include:

- Can students and researchers from such countries operate independently of their regimes?
- As an institution, do we have a responsibility to protect them or is the risk too great?

When is collaboration with companies morally responsible?

Collaborations with companies should also be scrutinised. These often have their own agenda, sometimes influenced by national interest. They also pursue (commercial) goals that sometimes harm health or the environment. Well-known examples are the tobacco industry and the fossil fuel sector. A more recent example is the question whether collaboration with (and dependence on) BigTech is justified, given current developments in the US and China, and the huge political influence on BigTech. How, or under what conditions, can you as a researcher collaborate with companies that produce unhealthy products or unhealthy food, or be influenced politically, for example? As a researcher, can you participate in 'improving' essentially unhealthy or environmentally damaging products? Questions include whether guidelines are helpful for this (or whether they are too abstract), and whether this should be an individual or rather an institutional consideration.

4.2. Collaboration with institutions in Israel

The meetings aimed to discuss Radboud University's international collaborations in general. However, the issue of collaboration with Israel/Gaza is so prominent in many people's minds that the conversation often turned specifically to that. We therefore share separately some of the outcomes from the conversations on this topic. These overlap with the more general dilemmas mentioned above, but apply here specifically to collaboration with institutions in Israel.

- For some students and staff, it is obvious that Israeli universities are not independent of the state and therefore complicit in genocide condemned by international bodies. Radboud University's collaboration with these institutions gives rise to a crisis of conscience in this group. They feel powerless and struggle with whether they still want to be associated with an institution that does not take a stand and is therefore, in their eyes, complicit in genocide. Underlying this is the fact that the Dutch government is not taking a stand, so the need is now being expressed at other public institutions. However, it was also argued that Dutch political choices should be followed when maintaining international collaborations.
- Collaboration in this situation is thus seen as legitimising the Israeli government's position. Linked to this is the issue: What signal are you sending? Whether you break or retain ties, you send a signal either way. Neutrality is not an option. That makes the issue complicated and fraught. Doing nothing is interpreted as an endorsement of Israel's war operations or even the state of Israel. Breaking ties sends a signal that could be interpreted as 'anti-Israel' or even Jew-hatred.
- Conversely, others believe that the importance of joint knowledge building prevails. Excluding collaboration with parties would hinder this and should therefore be avoided. They believe that the political conflict in Israel is separate from scientific research and the intellectual capabilities of scientists there. The scientific field should be governed as little as possible by political issues. Similarly, some believe we should actually support critical Israeli researchers.
- The question is whether these are institutional or individual ties, and whether it is possible to make that distinction. Research is often not possible without institutional links (and associated grants), so it would make no sense to make the distinction.
- Some argue that if Radboud University's mission is strictly followed, collaboration with institutions in Israel should be ended. Therefore, a clear and unambiguous framework for action should be established based on the mission, without becoming rigid or dogmatic.
- Some people question whether a university is allowed to be neutral, not have an opinion. Should every scholar actively speak out for or against the war? And to what extent can a university be held responsible for what happens in another country?
- General framework or not, many participants feel that the university should take a stand in relation to Israel/Gaza anyway. There is a need for clarity on the basis of which values decisions are made. What values guide us and the collaborations we enter into? This is about a setting a clear lower limit.

Finally, several participants call on the Executive Board to pay attention to the strong emotions that prevail among some of the staff and students when it comes to the collaborations with Israeli universities. They call for additional meetings with scope for:

- The emotions that exist and the sense of injustice and powerlessness felt by both staff and students.
- What happened around demonstrations and their aftermath.
- The role of participational bodies and how they can be more involved in decision-making.

4.3. Additional topics deserving attention

Apart from dilemmas, participants also identified issues that should play a role in considering whether to enter, continue or terminate a collaboration.

Visibility and position of the Executive Board

Participants feel that the Executive Board has been invisible for too long, especially on the issue of collaboration with Israeli universities. Participants believe the Executive Board should be more proactive

and speak out about the (un)desirability of various international collaborations. They ask the Executive Board to come up with clear rules based on Radboud University's mission and, above all, to be transparent about the underlying considerations. Working from clear rules prevents arbitrariness or 'double standards'; this must be avoided. There is now a difference between situations, e.g. Russia and Israel. That makes it complicated for lecturers to explain to students what Radboud University's policy is in this. Many participants in the discussions expressed support for clarity and clear guidelines, even if they do not subscribe to them. Such clear guidelines should also be established for collaboration with companies and for those funding education and research.

The importance of taking a stand in time is also emphasised. Sometimes administrative speed is needed, regardless of whether everything has been investigated yet or not. As a university, dare to make mistakes. In the case of Israel/Gaza, many participants feel that the university should have taken a stand earlier, for example by 'freezing' the links - at least temporarily. After that, one can take time for discussion, adaptation and drafting a framework. Participants emphasise that 'freezing' or discontinuing collaborations is a temporary decision that should continue to be reviewed.

The lengthy consideration of whether or not to collaborate with institutions from Israel leads to tensions on campus that translate to the lecture halls. Lecturers and students face the consequences. Participants indicate that some students from Muslim backgrounds and some students from Jewish backgrounds do not feel safe. Some concrete recommendations for the Executive Board from the participants:

- Be more transparent in communication: explain why you do/don't do certain things and don't leave it to third-party interpretation.
- Even if certain ties (e.g. with Israeli universities) are not severed, clearly explain why.
- There should be room for emotions. Now the discussion is being approached too rationally.
- Set priorities: some collaborations require faster action than others. Not all collaborations can be examined comprehensively. Temporary cessation can be a solution when in doubt and when speed is required.

“Practice what you preach”: putting Radboud University's mission statement into practice

Radboud University has a strong vision and mission that includes clearly formulated values stating that Radboud University has and wants to play a social role. Participants in the discussions point out that the lack of concrete elaboration of these values can lead to the mission ultimately being seen as 'an empty shell'. Radboud University must show in practice that the values in its vision and mission do carry through into its actions: not acting is not neutral. The university's stance on queer rights is cited as a good example; there is no missionary zeal, but Radboud University does take a stand and acts accordingly.

Ensure democratic decision-making

Participants made statements about how decisions on this issue are made. Some question the role and position of the Advisory Committee, or the extent to which their advice will be taken seriously. They feel that the opinions of individual students and staff or the committee's advice should not determine Radboud University policy. The Executive Board should make such decisions based on Radboud University's institutional values. On the other hand, others think it is important to have an Advisory Committee and argue that it should also have decision-making power.

Democratic relations at the university are important, so make sure that formal structures also have a say. Members of the participational bodies, for example, say they want a voice in who is collaborated with. Questions that then arise include: How can we deal with the limited representation of students in participational bodies and the overall question of representation? And what is democratic in this? Should a decision be taken by majority? Is it up to the Executive Board to make the assessment, or the wider academic community?

5. Next step

The discussion of dilemmas does not provide unequivocal answers. However, it does offer insight into the questions, dilemmas and different opinions that exist within the academic community. We advise the

Executive Board to take these results to heart and at least give them a place in the broader follow-up process.