



## Strategic Plan 2023

PhD candidates Network Netherlands

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## Introduction

More than 37,000 PhD candidates were working on their PhD trajectory in the Netherlands at the moment of writing.<sup>1</sup> These PhD candidates carry out a substantial part of the research and teaching responsibilities at universities, university medical centres (UMCs) and other (research) institutions. Their daily work directly contributes to science and society and benefits the academic institutions. PhD candidates are the backbone of the Dutch academic system.

Since the foundation of PhD Network Netherlands in 1986, LAIOO at the time, PNN has represented the interest of all PhD candidates on a national level. PNN is an association, chaired by an independent board of PhD candidates and assisted by an Advisory Board. The members of PNN are PhD candidate representation councils (PhD organisations or POs in short) from various universities, university medical centres and other higher education institutions, such as universities of applied sciences. PNN explicitly represents *all* PhD candidates in the Netherlands: employed, bursary and external, from all nationalities.

The past year was full of interesting developments in Dutch academia. After a final lockdown in early 2022, the covid pandemic seems to have faded away. Yet, as delays were still felt, PNN kept a close look at funds for contract extensions through the Nationaal Programma Onderwijs (NP Onderwijs). The minister of Education, Culture and Science (Dutch: OCW) announced the end of the bursary experiment in 2024 by expressing the intention to not legally anchor this type of PhD trajectory<sup>2</sup>. As a pertinent opponent of this experiment, PNN could not agree more with the position of the minister. Moreover, PNN published a report on the rules and regulations at 15 different universities<sup>3</sup>, noting the lack of information and the differences between universities. Furthermore, significant media attention was given to scholarship and external PhD candidates, kickstarting the discussion on working conditions and remuneration of these PhDs<sup>4,5</sup>.

In 2023, PNN will continue to promote better working conditions for PhD candidates. PNN identified the following priorities for the coming year: improving social safety, the roll-out of the National Open Science Programme, the collective labour agreement negotiations and PNN's own visibility and representation towards individual PhD candidates. Special effort

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<sup>1</sup> Universiteiten van Nederland. Een gezonde praktijk in het Nederlandse promotiestelsel, accessed on 17/01/2023, [https://universiteitenvannederland.nl/nl\\_NL/Gezonde+praktijken+Promotiesysteem](https://universiteitenvannederland.nl/nl_NL/Gezonde+praktijken+Promotiesysteem)

<sup>2</sup> Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap(2022).Beleidsreactie op eindevaluatie experiment promotieonderwijs. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2022/05/31/kamerbrief-op-beleidsreactie-eindevaluatie-promotieonderwijs>

<sup>3</sup> Promovendi Netwerk Nederland(2022). PhD regulations in the Netherlands. <https://hetpnn.nl/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/PhD-regulations-in-the-Netherlands.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Follow the Money (2022). Chinese onderzoekers uitgeknepen door Nederlandse universiteiten. <https://www.ftm.nl/artikelen/chinese-onderzoekers-uitgeknepen-door-nederlandse-universiteiten>

<sup>5</sup> NRC (2022). Ongemak en schaamte over de opmars van gratis promovendi. <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2022/11/20/ongemak-en-schaamte-over-de-opmars-van-gratis-promovendi-a4148757>

will be directed towards gaining more insight into and attention for the problems that international scholarship PhD candidates are facing.

Hereby, PNN proudly presents their strategic plan for 2023. Its mission and vision is summarised per focus group, i.e. Communication and Partnerships, Labour Conditions and Recognition and Rewards. PNN hopes for a fruitful collaboration with its members and partners in order to successfully represent PhD candidates in the Netherlands in the coming year.

## Communication and partnerships

### Maintaining and extending external contacts

To represent the interest of PhD candidates on all relevant levels, PNN maintains contact with different partners. This includes the government, political parties, labour unions, the umbrella organisations for universities and university medical centres (UMCs), scientific advisory bodies and other interest groups. PNN is a member of the European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers (Eurodoc), ensuring international representation and alignment.

In the last years, good progress has been made on establishing contact with relevant parties. This year, PNN will focus on maintaining and, where necessary, intensifying its network, through:

- **Having regular contact with relevant parties** in and related to Dutch academia and research. Parties included (but not limited to) are the Association of Dutch Universities (UNL), the Dutch Federation of University Medical Centres (NFU) and the Dutch ministry of Education, Culture and Science (ministry of OCW). In terms of improving labour conditions, PNN regularly provides input to labour unions (AOB, FNV, CNV). Collaboration with advocacy groups in academia, such as PostdocNL and LNVH, is essential for a unified sound and remains a priority.
- **Improving the political lobby** by entering into direct, personal contact with members of the House of Representatives (or their policy officers) and supplying them with information and problems relevant to the daily life and future careers of PhD candidates in the Netherlands.

### Strengthening bonds with PNN's members

The covid pandemic has weakened the connections and disrupted interactions between PNN and its members, the local PhD organisations (POs). Nevertheless, their input is vital for PNN to properly represent all PhD candidates on a national level. In addition, the POs can also learn from each other, as the issues that PhD candidates encounter are often similar across different institutions. Therefore, we aim to strengthen and reinforce the bond between PNN and all its members by:

- **Investing in the relationship with POs.** We will do so by regularly meeting with them, and conversing with them about the general as well as local problems they encounter.
- **Facilitating interactions between the different POs.** This will allow them to learn from each other as well as share best practices. By providing the POs with platforms (e.g. the general members meeting (GMM)) and means of communication (e.g. a WhatsApp group), we hope to strengthen this interaction and stimulate them to collaborate.

## Improving PNN's visibility

It is important that PNN is visible and known among individual PhD candidates and other stakeholders, to ensure that relevant parties know how to find PNN for anything related to the daily life of PhD candidates in the Netherlands as well as their future career steps. We aim to maintain and increase our visibility, through:

- [Providing updates both](#) on our social media, e.g. Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram, and by sending out a monthly newsletter. Updates include matters that are important and relevant to PhD candidates, such as new reports, their rights as stated in the collective labour agreements (CLA) and recent efforts by PNN.
- [Updating the website](#) to make it easy for PhD candidates and other relevant parties to find information on our website.
- [Being responsive and approachable](#) on a daily basis to our contacts via the PNN email.

## Labour Conditions

Labour conditions of PhD candidates have always been among PNN's core interests. The main aim for 2023 is to raise awareness on labour rights of PhD candidates in various situations, with special attention to scholarship PhD candidates. This is in addition to more commonly recurring themes such as social safety and input to the collective labour agreement (CLA) negotiations. PNN will continue to work closely with the Dutch labour unions that are active in the education sector, such as AOb, FNV, and CNV to bring the interests of PhD candidates on the agenda.

### Raising awareness on labour rights

PhD candidates often do not have sufficient knowledge of the rights that come with their employment or what is stated in the CLA they fall under. Therefore PNN tasks itself with informing institutions, local PhD organisations, and individual PhD candidates of their labour rights and how to proceed in case they are disrespected. Central in this will be:

- **Continuing the “Know Your Rights” (KYR) sessions**, held together with our members, the local PhD organisations (POs). This also increases the visibility of PNN in the PhD community. So far these sessions have mostly been focussed on PhD candidates at universities, but PNN also wants to give these sessions at medical centres.
- **Actively communicating on labour conditions** with the general public through PNN's (social) media channels.

### Improving social safety

Universities, university medical centres (UMCs) and other institutions for higher education are hierarchical organisations. As so-called early career scholars, PhD candidates are per definition at the bottom of the hierarchical academic ladder and are dependent on their supervisor(s) for successfully completing their trajectory. This places PhD candidates in a vulnerable position for undesired and transgressive behaviour. Our PhD survey has shown that social safety remains a large issue for PhD candidates.<sup>6</sup> For example, they fear that reporting issues will have consequences for their PhD trajectory and career, or they are actively discouraged from making a report. In recent years, more attention has been paid to the importance of a socially safe working environment.<sup>7</sup> Universities have implemented a requirement to introduce a university ‘ombudsman’ functionary in their CLA. Although improvements are noted, there are still challenges to work on. PNN aims to contribute to social safety by:

- **Creating awareness on the social safety structures that currently exist.** We received

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<sup>6</sup> Promovendi Netwerk Nederland (2020). *PhD Survey*. <https://hetpnn.nl/phdsurvey2020/>.

<sup>7</sup> KNAW. (2022). *Sociale veiligheid in de Nederlandse wetenschap - Van papier naar praktijk*. <https://www.knaw.nl/publicaties/sociale-veiligheid-de-nederlandse-wetenschap-van-papier-naar-praktijk-0>.

positive reactions to our roadmap<sup>8</sup> that guides PhD candidates through options when the relationship with a supervisor goes south. PNN wants to work with its members to create more locally relevant roadmaps to help guide PhD candidates through commonly encountered issues.

- **Improving social safety structures that are currently in place.** Although universities are now required by their CLA to have an ‘ombudsman’, their tasks and activities vary widely between universities. PNN wants to increase harmonisation across the way these ombudspersons work. Furthermore, since UMCs are not yet required to have an ombudsperson, PNN strives to promote this. Meanwhile PNN will investigate how PhD candidates at UMCs can currently best report issues to the relevant authorities.

## Keeping an eye on PhD candidates working in medical centres

A large group of PhD candidates are employed by a medical centre instead of a university, meaning that they fall under a separate collective labour agreement (CLA). PNN’s working group National Platform for UMC PhDs (Dutch: Landelijk Overleg UMC Promovendi; LOUP) discusses the specific challenges that this group faces. For this group of PhD Candidates, PNN’s aims are the following:

- **Creating more equality amongst different types of PhD candidates in hospitals.** Currently not all PhD candidates are treated in the same way. Within UMCs Medical Doctor (MD) PhD candidates are placed in a higher salary scale than other PhD candidates, while they often perform the same work. Furthermore, PhD candidates at peripheral hospitals have difficulties getting access to the same facilities as PhD candidates at UMCs. PNN strives for equal treatment for equal work, and hence to decrease differential treatment of PhD candidates.
- **Increasing representation within the labour unions and at CLA negotiations.** Although MD PhD candidates are relatively well represented at the CLA negotiations through parties that join in the negotiations (e.g. The Young Specialist/DJS and FBZ), this is different for PhD candidates with a different academic background. PNN has the goal to improve relations with other labour unions, such as FNV or CNV, to increase representation for all PhD candidates. This can both improve the position of non MD PhD candidates at the negotiations, as well as help PhD candidates with cases of misconduct due to the legal help the unions can provide.

## Improving the position of external, international and scholarship PhD candidates

In PNN’s experience, external, international and scholarship PhD candidates are often the most difficult PhD candidates to reach. Unfortunately, they are also among the most vulnerable. PNN has received various signals that the labour conditions of scholarship PhD

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<sup>8</sup> <https://hetonn.nl/kvr/pnn-supervisors-conflict-roadmap/>

candidates are unfavourable. Various media outlets have picked up the–sometimes precarious–conditions under which bursary PhD candidates work.<sup>9,10</sup> However, data is lacking on this group. PNN believes that collecting and publishing detailed information on scholarship candidates is a first step towards understanding the challenges faced by them and to gradually improve their working and living conditions.

As mentioned above, it is not uncommon that PhD candidates in general are not aware of their basic rights, but this is even more prevalent among international candidates, who speak different languages and who are not familiar with the Dutch academic system and work environment. It is important that international PhD candidates have a complete and realistic idea of the working conditions that they will have in the Netherlands, even before starting their research. PNN is thus committed to provide high-quality information, in English, on the rights and obligations of external and scholarship PhD candidates.

In the coming year, PNN will focus on:

- **Collecting, generating and processing data related to scholarship candidates.** PNN will create, distribute and process a survey for scholarship PhD candidates to gather data about this specific group and the challenges they face. The findings of this survey will result in a report, which will be publicly available.
- **Promoting availability of useful, updated and accessible information for international, external and scholarship PhD candidates.** PNN will create a document for scholarship candidates with useful information to consider. This document will include an explanation of the different types of PhD candidates in the Netherlands and an overview of the immigration process. The objective of this document is to help candidates to make an informed decision to start a PhD in the Netherlands.
- **Increasing awareness with local representatives of PhD candidates.** PNN will be in constant communication with the POs to take into account the interests of the external, international and scholarship candidates, and collaborate with the POs to attract more voices from these groups and increase their representation in the local councils.
- **Reducing inequality between PhD candidates.** PNN strives towards an equal playing ground where PhD candidates at the same institution are remunerated equally for the same work. PNN aims for all bursary PhD candidates to be employed at their respective institutions.

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<sup>9</sup> Follow the Money (2022). *Chinese onderzoekers uitgeknepen door Nederlandse universiteiten*. <https://www.ftm.nl/artikelen/chinese-onderzoekers-uitgeknepen-door-nederlandse-universiteiten>

<sup>10</sup> NRC (2022). *Ongemak en schaamte over de opmars van gratis promovendi*. <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2022/11/20/ongemak-en-schaamte-over-de-opmars-van-gratis-promovendi-a4148757>



## Recognition and Rewards

When assessing PhD trajectories, there is still a strong emphasis on quantitative output measures, such as the number of articles (published or publishable) or the number of chapters in the dissertation. Nevertheless, PhD candidates often perform many other tasks, such as teaching and supervision, or are actively pursuing societal impact, policy changes and employee participation. PNN supports the new Recognition and Rewards movement, which focuses on, among other things, shifting the focus from research quantity to research quality. This Recognition and Rewards movement also aims at enabling scientists to focus on developing their unique qualities in, for example, public outreach, education, impact, or leadership, and for UMCs, patient care. Furthermore, PhD candidates should be recognized and rewarded for collaborations with and without an interdisciplinary character. PNN notes that PhD candidates, both at a local and a national level, are not yet structurally included in these discussions. In order to successfully implement the new Recognition and Rewards movement, the future generation of scientists must be involved.

### Involving PhD Candidates in the Recognition and Rewards movement

PNN advocates for a system in which the broader range of tasks and activities of PhD candidates is recognized and rewarded. The new Recognition and Rewards should make it possible to include all activities of a PhD candidate in the assessment of their PhD trajectory, without this translating into a long list of extra criteria that will have a negative impact on the workload. Simultaneously, the emerging diversity of types of PhD trajectories may pose a challenge and could require tailor made solutions. PNN will work on:

- [Encouraging initiatives that allow PhD candidates to allocate research time](#) to developing the qualities that are flagships in the Recognition and Rewards movement.
- [Collaborating with its members to develop a vision](#) of what the new Recognition and Rewards means for PhD candidates and the assessment of PhD trajectories.
- [Expanding its network around this theme](#) and, where possible, contributing to existing initiatives, to ensure that PhD candidates are included in the change to the new Recognition and Rewards.

### Improving Open Science practices

Open Science and Recognition and Rewards are closely intertwined. Open Science aims to shift the focus of science back to generating reliable and reproducible knowledge, and away from putting out as many papers as possible in the journal with the highest impact factor, regardless of how accessible or reproducible that information is. The Recognition and Rewards movement will be pivotal in enabling scientists to adopt the Open Science

principles. Although the PNN PhD Survey 2020<sup>11</sup> shows that the majority of PhD candidates in the Netherlands are already being encouraged to contribute to Open Science, a quarter of them are not. In addition, it appears that PhD candidates mainly publish open access, and to a lesser extent engage in other Open Science practices, such as adhering to FAIR data principles or Open Education. PNN therefore sees a lot of room for improvement in promoting Open Science practices among PhD candidates. The Recognition and Rewards movement will play an important role in this, so that bibliometric indicators for scientific output can be abandoned. Further progress can be made by adapting the current criteria, such as publishing in journals with certain quality criteria, to criteria that encourage Open Access publishing and other forms of Open Science. This also means that institutions must provide financial support for Open Science research, including the provision of specific training courses and time for PhD candidates to allocate to working on Open Science. PNN will focus on:

- [Advocating for the inclusion of PhD candidates and their interests in the development of Recognition and Rewards policies and in Open Science.](#) PNN will continue to strive for more awareness among PhD candidates on Open Science, by forming a bridge between PhD candidates and policymakers on this subject. In addition, PNN will focus on informing PhD candidates about Open Science and maintaining and expanding contacts with local and national initiatives.

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<sup>11</sup> Promovendi Netwerk Nederland (2020). *PhD Survey*. <https://hetpnn.nl/phdsurvey2020/>.

## Closing

As a board for and by PhD candidates, PNN will continue to promote their interests on a national level and try to support and improve their position. Through the mission and strategic points of focus for the coming year as mentioned in this strategic plan, PNN and its members are working towards a future proof research climate in the Netherlands.

While the covid crisis and its aftermath continues to have an impact in areas such as financial and (mental) health of PhD candidates, PNN's focus can be redirected to other topics and developments. PNN is looking forward to the new year: 2023 will be a year of new developments and possibilities. PNN would like to thank those who are committed to the wellbeing of PhD candidates and encourage everyone to contribute to a healthy and thriving academic society.

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