



## **Strategic Plan 2022**

### **PhD Candidates Network Netherlands**

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**Charlotte de Blecourt (General Board member - Recognition and Rewards - Career)**

**Malika Ouacha (General Board member - Recognition and Rewards - Working Conditions)**

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## Summary

In 2022, PNN will continue to represent the interests of PhD candidates in the Netherlands. The focus, in summary, will be on raising awareness for the rights of all PhDs and their social safety, diversity and mental health issues, as well as advocating for Recognition and Rewards and other aspects, including Open Science, and improving our visibility and partnerships. In this strategic plan, the following aims will be exemplified:

- Raising awareness of labor rights for PhDs and ensuring that these are maintained
- Striving for the recognition of the PhD candidate as an employee, and not as a student as PNN considers PhD research to be work
- Improving social safety for PhD candidates as well as raising awareness on issues of mental health, diversity and inclusion
- Greater equity between PhD positions and improving visibility and representation of PhDs at external locations
- Advocating for improved registration for external PhDs and an increased support for international PhDs, and communication to and within these groups of PhDs
- Striving towards an improved system of recognition and rewards and open science for PhD candidates
- Improving opportunities for career development of PhD candidates, better preparing them for a future inside and/or outside of science
- Strengthening bonds with members and PhDs, improving PNNs visibility and extending collaborations

## Introduction

In 1986, a formal legal framework was established for assistants and researchers in training (AIO/OIO), the so-called 'AIO system'. AIOs and OIOs wanted to be involved from the start, thus, the National AIO (and OIO) Consultation (LAIOO) was established in 1987. With the introduction of the University Job Classification (UFO) in 2003 and thereby that of the PhD system, the terms 'AIO' and 'OIO' were replaced by the term 'PhD candidates'. In response to these developments, LAIOO was renamed in 2003 as the PhD candidate Network Netherlands (PNN).

Thirty-four years later, PNN continues to promote the interests of PhD candidates. PNN is chaired by its own independent board of PhDs and is assisted by an Advisory Board. The members of PNN are the active PhD candidate representation councils (PhD Organizations or POs) at the various universities, university medical centers (UMCs), and other higher education institutions, such as universities of applied sciences. PNN can therefore proudly say that it represents all PhD candidates in the Netherlands.

The past year was an eventful year in which societal developments, such as the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, were also reflected in science. This corona crisis has, among others, led to research delays and although there has been governmental financial aid issued through the Nationaal Programma Onderwijs (NPO) for contract extensions for PhD candidates, there is much uncertainty. Moreover, the compulsory working from home measures have been a challenge for many. Social safety stood high on the agenda at universities as well and efforts were made to introduce a university 'ombudsman'. Also, the final evaluation started of the PhD education experiment, which led to cheaper PhD trajectories for universities by turning PhD candidates into 'PhD students', despite persistent protests from these 'PhD students', PNN, and other critical parties.

In 2022, PNN will continue to promote social safety, measures that try to limit the consequences of the corona crisis for PhD candidates, as well as preserving the position and rights of PhDs as employees of the university, UMC or other higher education institution. PNN also identifies the following as important priorities for the coming year: strengthening the bonds with our members and our partners, the mental health of PhD candidates, recognizing and rewarding PhD programs that do justice to all activities and not merely research, and PNNs own visibility and representation to individual PhD candidates and relevant parties.

Hereby, PNN proudly presents their strategic plan of 2022. Its mission and vision is summarized per focus group, e.g. Visibility and Partnerships, Labor Conditions and Recognition and Rewards. PNN hopes for a fruitful collaboration with its members and partners in order to represent PhD candidates in the Netherlands in the coming year.

## Visibility and Partnerships

### Strengthening bonds with members and PhDs

PNN aims to become better known among PhD candidates, more accessible to its members, and recognized as a trusted partner by relevant parties. The visibility of PNN towards all stakeholders is vital to accurately represent the interests of PhD candidates on a national level.

Currently, there are an estimated 20,000 to 25,000 PhD candidates in the Netherlands. They carry out a substantial part of the research and teaching responsibilities at universities, university medical centers (UMCs) and other (research) institutions. PhD candidates are represented at an institutional level by local PhD organizations (POs), which are united in PNN. Unfortunately, many PhD candidates are often not aware of the existence of the local POs. We aim to strengthen and reinforce the position of both POs and their local representatives, by:

- **Investing in the relationship between PNN and these local POs.** We will do so by meeting them, when possible, on location and conversing with them about the general as well as local problems they encounter.
- **Facilitating interaction between the different POs,** with the aim to improve communication between them. This will allow them to learn from each other and to share and implement best practices amongst themselves. By providing them a platform and means of communication, we hope to realize this interaction and stimulate them to collaborate.
- **Improving the position of local POs.** We believe that good, local representation is beneficiary to both PhD candidates as well as their employers. Therefore, we aim to empower the local representatives: we will help organize and facilitate local POs, as well as lobby for the much-needed recognition and reward of local representatives.

### Improving PNNs visibility

Since PNN represents the interests of all PhD candidates, we believe that it is important to be visible and accessible to PhDs. To do so, we will focus on improving PNNs online presence, increasing visibility and (online) findability. Special attention is given to groups that are difficult to reach for local POs, such as international PhD candidates and external PhD candidates. An (annual) stunt or a campaign can contribute PNNs visibility. We will improve our visibility by:

- **Being responsive and approachable** on a daily basis in our contacts via our PNN phone and email address.
- **Providing regular updates** on data, interests, activities and announcements that are relevant to PhD candidates in the Netherlands, including updates on the efforts of PNN. Main communication will occur through daily maintenance of our social media channels, e.g. Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram.
- **Organizing at least one major event per year** to improve knowledge transfer amongst PhDs and visibility of POs to PhDs, but also of PNN to individual PhD candidates. A return of the annual, national PhD day and/or the awarding of a Supervisor of the Year award is among the possibilities.

### Extending collaborations

To ensure the interest of PhD candidates is taken into account, PNN maintains contact with different partners, including the government, political parties, labor unions, the umbrella organizations for universities and UMCs, scientific advisory bodies, and other interest groups. In addition, PNN is a member of the European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior

Researchers (Eurodoc). PNN frequently participates in sounding boards, events and interviews to ensure the PhD voice is heard. PNN will focus on maintaining and expanding its network, through:

- **Incentivization and maintenance of the contact between PNN and relevant parties** in the Dutch PhD world. Parties included (but not limited to) are the Association of Dutch universities (UNL, previously known as VSNU), the Dutch Federation of University Medical Centers (NFU) and the Ministry of Education (ministry OCW). Additionally, we will join sounding boards, monitoring and evaluation committees and other meetings and committees in which PNN can improve the position of PhDs in the Netherlands on a national level.
- **Improving the political lobby**, by entering into direct, personal contact with members of the House of Representatives and supplying them with information and problems which are relevant to the daily life of PhD candidates. We will also do so via the sending of a biannual newsletter, to redirect attention to difficulties and problems that PhDs are facing which require the attention of political representatives.

## Labor Conditions

### **PhD candidate as an employee, not a student**

During their PhD trajectory, PhD candidates carry out both academic tasks, such as conducting scientific research, publishing in scientific journals and teaching, as well as tasks from the fields of management, valorization and employee representation. Nevertheless, this is often not regarded as labor within universities and UMCs, and PhD candidates are often referred to as “PhD students”, even when they have an employment contract and employee status. The PhD Scholarship Program Experiment, as well as similar experiments in the past, actively try to implement a system in which PhD candidates are viewed and registered as students, not protected by a collective labor agreement, and receiving a grant/scholarship instead of salary. This has various negative financial, legal and personal consequences, leading to an increase in uncertainty about their future, for example due to more difficulties with mortgage applications and family planning.

PNN has a clear stance on this issue: doing a PhD is work, and PhD candidates are employees, not students. An employment contract for PhD candidates working for universities and UMCs is therefore essential. Through investing in good labor conditions, such as quality supervision, talented individuals can be attracted to the Dutch academia, and retained. PNN will continue to advocate for good labor conditions for all PhD candidates through:

- **Cooperation and strengthening relations with other parties**, such as the AOb, FNV, CNV, UNL (formerly known as VSNU), NFU, de Jonge Specialist, and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.
- **Increasing awareness among PhD candidates about their rights** under the collective labor agreement (CAO) by organizing the “Know Your Rights” meetings at universities and UMCs, social media activity, and encouraging local POs to pay close attention to PhD rights.

### **Improving social safety for PhD candidates**

Universities, UMCs and other institutions for higher education are hierarchical organizations. As so-called early career scholars, PhD candidates are by definition at the bottom of the hierarchical academic ladder and are dependent on their supervisor(s). This makes them vulnerable to undesired and transgressive behavior. This dependence can be a significant barrier in discussing problems and raising them with the existing support structures. PNN receives signals that especially when the behavior of the supervisor is the problem, PhD candidates feel powerless. For example, they fear that making a report will have consequences for their PhD trajectory and career, or they are actively discouraged from making a report. Moreover, there seems to be a lack of clear rules and guidelines at universities and UMCs about changing supervisors. In recent years, more attention has been paid in the media, politics and institutions to the importance of a socially safe working environment. By law, universities are to introduce the university ‘ombudsman’ functionary. Previous cases from the University of Amsterdam show that commitment to social safety continues to be necessary.

PNN advocates for a socially safe working environment for PhD candidates, by:

- **Creating a “road map”** with step-by-step propositions showing general options how a PhD candidate is able to change their work environment, and possibly also their supervision, if that appears to be necessary.

- **Raising awareness on the presence of existing help structures**, e.g. confidential advisors, the local POs, and other that can help in situations of a socially unsafe working environment, like the new ‘ombudsman’ at the universities.
- **Continuing to raise awareness on undesirable and transgressive behavior** and the need for a socially safe working environment on social media, and advocate for mandatory supervision courses for first-time PhD supervisors.

### **Labor conditions - Universities**

PNN has two main goals in regard to the labor conditions at the universities:

- **Raising awareness of the labor rights** that are installed by actively informing PhD candidates.
- **Ensuring that these labor rights are maintained**, while advocating for their improvement.

PhD candidates that fall under the collective labor agreement of the Dutch universities (CAO NU), often don’t have sufficient knowledge of the rights that come with their employment. Therefore, it is crucial to strengthen the contact with the local POs and the entire PhD community in the Netherlands, in order to actively inform them about their labor rights and how to claim in case they are disrespected. Central in this will be to continue and further develop the “Know Your Rights” sessions that will be held together with the local POs, which will also increase the visibility of PNN in the PhD community.

In order to monitor the compliance with the labor rights of PhD candidates, PNN publishes a yearly labor conditions monitor with the support of data by AcademicTransfer. PNN aims to further develop this monitor report by making it more representative of the Dutch PhD community, and, therefore, making it more meaningful. Furthermore, it will be of utmost importance to strengthen and extend the collaborations and contact with the Dutch labor unions that are active in the education sector, such as AOb, FNV, and CNV. The collaborations with the labor unions are of fundamental importance in order to bring the interests of PhD candidates on the agenda at negotiations of the labor conditions in Dutch higher education.

### **Labor conditions - UMC**

This specific portfolio will focus coming year on:

- **Achieving greater equality between PhD positions** and doctoral regulations within the various UMCs.
- **Improving the visibility and the representation of PhD candidates associated with peripheral hospitals.**

UMCs are nationally represented by the Dutch Federation for UMCs (NFU). PhD candidates at the individual UMCs form a separate group of PhD candidates in the Netherlands with their own collective labor agreement (CAO UMC). There is a wide variety of types of constructions within which PhD candidates at UMCs obtain their PhD. The working group National Platform for UMC PhDs (LOUP) discusses the specific challenges that this group faces regularly. During the coming period, emphasis will be on achieving greater equality between PhD positions within the various UMCs. Currently, there are various types of contracts that differ with regards to primary and secondary employment conditions. In addition, doctoral regulations appear to vary greatly per UMC, despite existing guidelines from the NFU. In collaboration with relevant partners, PNN will advocate for clear and uniform PhD regulations for all UMCs that are in line with current trends.



PNN started organizing UMC-specific 'Know Your Rights' meetings to raise awareness amongst PhD candidates about their rights and obligations. During the coming period we would like to improve the content of these meetings based on the first pilot Know Your Right sessions. In addition, LOUP started making an inventory of PhD candidates who work in peripheral hospitals. This group of PhD candidates was not visible, and they often had difficulty knowing how to reach representative organizations like POs or PNN. In the past year, we distributed a survey among a group of peripheral MD/PhD candidates. During the coming year, we want to further expand this special working group and publish the first results.

### **Labor conditions - External, International and Scholarship PhD candidates**

PNN will focus in this portfolio on:

- **Advocating for improved external PhD candidate registration and access to support**, including supervision and facilities.
- **Advocating for increased support for international PhD candidates**, especially in the areas of equal pay, integration, housing, and mental health.
- **Increasing the communication** with external, international and scholarship PhD candidates, and their representation.

There is a lot of diversity in the set up and the trajectories of external PhD projects. External PhD candidates can be employees within companies, obtaining a doctorate from a career perspective, or they can be employees employed by educational institutions, such as lecturers at universities of applied sciences (HBO), institutions for secondary vocational education (MBO), or high school teachers, encountering issues within their work that they would like to explore further. There are no official guidelines on the registration or agreements that need to be made for the external PhD candidates. Thus, external PhD candidates are often not (properly) registered at the universities or UMCs and there are no formal agreements. This leads to insufficient support for external PhDs, including limited access to facilities, e.g. the library, academic literature and a workspace, as well as limited contact and connection with colleagues from the department, and limited contact and supervision from their supervisor at the university or the UMC. PNN aims to improve the external PhD candidates' situation by initiating the discussion with institutions and working towards submitting a proposal for an unambiguous registration of external PhDs and guidelines for their supervisors. PNN will also prepare a template for potential external PhD candidates they could use to sign a formal agreement with their employers about their PhD.

The PNN survey indicated that more than 40% of all PhD candidates in the Netherlands are international PhDs. PNN will continue to raise awareness of specific issues that these candidates encounter, and to advocate to the research institutions for increased support for international PhDs, especially in the areas of equal pay, integration, housing and mental health. PNN is also committed to provide high-quality information on PhD candidates' rights and obligations in English for international PhD candidates to read. Special attention will be paid to international scholarship PhD candidates with scholarships from their home countries. Often, these candidates do the same job, but have to live on a lower budget than their employed colleagues receiving a salary, and sometimes their scholarship is even lower than the Dutch minimum wage. Although some universities provide a so-called "top-up" grant, this is not standard. PNN will increase the awareness of these issues faced by scholarship PhD candidates, and continue to advocate for the candidates to receive pay equal to their employed colleagues.

Finally, external, international and scholarship PhD candidates are often the hardest groups to reach for the PNN and for the POs. PNN will continue to collaborate with the POs and work on social media to attract more voices from these groups to increase their representation. In addition, PNN will reach out to organizations in contact with these groups, such as Marie Curie Alumni Association and Netwerk Promoveren in het MBO, to establish contact and collaboration.

## Recognition and Rewards

### Implementing 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, or are actively pursuing societal impact, management and employee participation. PNN supports the new Recognition and Rewards movement, which focusses on, among other things, shifting the focus from research quantity to quality. This Recognition and Rewards also aims to enable scientists to focus on developing their unique qualities in, for example, public outreach, education, impact, leadership, or 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 local and national level, are not yet structurally included in these discussions. In order to successfully implement the new Recognition and Rewards, the future generation of scientists must be involved.

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, this 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, contribute to existing initiatives, to ensure that PhDs are included in the change to the new Recognition and Rewards.

### Open Science

Although the PNN PhD Survey 2020 shows that the majority of PhD candidates in the Netherlands are already being encouraged to do Open Science, a quarter of PhDs is 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 sharing data. 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. 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. In conclusion, PNN will focus on:

- **Organizing information sessions** on Open Science and Recognition and Rewards together with the local PhD organizations and organizations in the field.
- **Advocating for the inclusion of PhD candidates and their interests in the development of Recognition and Rewards policies.**

### **Career prospects**

The Recognition and Rewards movement implies that an academic's career is not only defined scientific output, but also education, outreach and applying scientific skills and findings in practice. This is highly relevant for the future career of PhD candidates, since almost two-third of PhD graduates leave academia after passing their viva. However, PNN's PhD Survey 2020 implied that less than 40% of PhD candidates had access to career training. Thus, the road beyond graduation isn't always clear. PNN aims to improve this on:

- **Striving to inform PhDs of opportunities** through talks at our local PhD councils, our website, personal advice, and by sharing interesting opportunities and programmes of our partners, such as AcademicTransfer and Thrive Institute.
- **Maintaining the Professional PhD Programme**, where PhD candidates are given the opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills outside their usual academic setting.

### **Focus on mental health**

Science is known as a highly competitive sector with a high workload, focusing on bibliometrics measuring scientific output (such as h-indexes). In recent years, this has been increasingly recognized and more attention has been paid to the high prevalence of chronic stress, insomnia and burnout among scientists. PhD candidates are also burdened by this high work pressure. Both national and international research on PhDs show a disturbing picture of (a high risk of) serious psychological complaints, including depression, general anxiety and burnout. We have seen that the corona crisis and the associated research delay and social isolation have exacerbated the existing problems. This is specifically true for international PhD candidates, who have a less extensive social safety net compared to Dutch PhDs and in some cases are not able to travel back to their home country. Psychological complaints as a result of the high workload and the corona crisis affect the whole of science. However, if the current system is maintained, we run the risk that talented young academics will not choose a job in science.

It should be possible to obtain a doctorate in a way that does not endanger (mental) health. This means that the workload must be reduced, and that science will focus more on quality instead of quantity, as well as the performance of research groups and team science instead of individuals. PNN believes that more attention should be paid to mental health among PhDs, and aims this by:

- **Increasing awareness on support structures, requesting them to be findable and accessible to all PhD candidates**, including those without an employment contract. PNN sometimes receives signals that, for example, scholarship PhDs are sent away from the company doctor because they do not have an employment contract. At the same time, PhD-specific psychologists are increasingly being appointed to institutions, a development that the PNN welcomes.
- **Collaborating with relevant partners**, such as WOinActie, on the themes of work pressure and mental health.
- **Continuing to raise awareness**, as with the theme of social safety stated below, and informing its members and encourage them to share good practices with each other.

## **Diversity and Inclusion**

Along with our continuous aim for developing better conditions regarding Recognitions and Rewards, social safety and mental health, PNN also aims to focus on diversity and inclusion. PNN considers the definition of diversity and inclusion in the broadest way, e.g. cultural identities, gender, sexual preferences (and the expression of such), religious identities and inclusiveness amongst PhDs in the Netherlands. We hope to gain insight in the background of PhDs and their daily struggles, for ourselves and Dutch academia. Also, by raising awareness on the (lack of) inclusiveness within academia, questions whether there is unconditional recognition, based on ethnicity, gender, religion, and culture, and whether there is sufficient support experienced, can be answered.

PNN strives to ascertain the answer to those questions through several actions, including by:

- **Strengthening current connections with our network**, such as LNVH, Eerste Generaties, and Zeytun.
- **Gaining more insight on this subject**, through social gatherings, brainstorm sessions, panel discussions and one-on-one meetings, and reflect this back into our network and beyond. We aim to attend as many as possible of these social gatherings, brainstorm sessions and such. Also, specific focus will be on interviewing first-generation, diverse PhDs, and write about them, so we will document their experiences.
- **Increasing awareness and spreading our message with our point of view**, as much as we expect universities to do that, through our social media platforms.

## Closing

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### **Closing**

The year 2021 was, again, a difficult year for many. Despite the fact that the corona crisis and its aftermath will continue having an impact in areas such as financial and (mental) health, PNN is looking forward to the new year: 2022 will be a year of changes, possibilities and hope. PNN would like to encourage everyone and thank those who are committed to the wellbeing of PhD candidates.

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