

PhD policy: recommendations and best practices

Published on 16-06-2023

Context

Having a proper policy on PhD candidates in place helps doctoral candidates to go through their PhD trajectory as smoothly as possible, which benefits both the candidate and the institute that they are affiliated with. Such policy measures can be defined either in the doctoral regulations ('promotiereglement') or in separate policy documents.

In this brief report, Promovendi Netwerk Nederland (PhD Network Netherlands; PNN) lists several PhD policy recommendations, grouped into six different categories. PNN believes these recommendations should be an integral part of *any* institute-wide PhD policy. Currently this is not the case: although all Dutch research institutes have defined policy measures related to PhD candidates, the exact policies vary between institutes and generally do not cover all points that PNN finds essential.¹

If PNN was aware of any institutes where a particular policy recommendation is already (partly) in place, the name of that institute and the way in which the policy recommendation is implemented there is also provided. Hence, this document is both a list of recommended policy measures as well as an overview of best practices.

Please note that the best practices overview is in no way exhaustive: if an institute is not mentioned, it does not automatically imply that this institute does not have the policy recommendation in place.

¹ PNN would like to remark that for postdocs, the situation is generally worse: many Dutch research institutes have no postdoc policy or vision at all. PNN believes that universities should consider formulating a postdoc policy that aligns with existing PhD policy documents. However, as PNN represents PhD candidates, the focus of this document is on doctoral candidates only.

Recommendations and best practices

1. PhD regulations

The four recommendations listed below can also be found, with additional context, in PNN's report 'PhD regulations in the Netherlands', published in October 2022.²

- Essential information should be included and easily accessible through the central doctorate regulations (and possible appendices), since it is crucial for PhD candidates to know the graduation criteria they will be evaluated upon.
- The fundamental criteria on which the decision is made to award (or not to award) the doctoral degree to a candidate should be more harmonized between regulations.
- Academic institutions need to explicitly define the ceremonial character of the defense in their doctoral regulations, or, if institutions nevertheless decide that rejection is possible, institutions should at the very least provide clear information on possible next steps (including possibilities of appeal) in the event of a rejection. In addition, written and constructive feedback should be provided in the case of a rejection.
- Academic institutions should implement elements from the Recognition and Rewards movement in their doctoral regulations (e.g., allowing candidates to include a thesis chapter on a topic that is related to academia but not directly to research, such as teaching or representation).

2. PhD supervision

- Providing 'upward' feedback should be encouraged and institutionalized. Ideally, the moment for the PhD candidate to provide upward feedback is different from the moment the candidate receives downward feedback.
 - Radboudumc, Donders Institute: an annual survey is sent out to all PhD candidates, which also includes a section on supervision feedback. Only the graduate school coordinator can see the results.
 - Leiden University: at the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, certain departments have an appointed graduate mentor that speaks to PhD candidates on an individual basis. General points of feedback for supervisors are communicated during intervision sessions with all supervisors led by the graduate mentor.
- Every PhD candidate should have at least one independent person involved in their PhD trajectory. This person should not be a collaborator of the candidate's supervisors, and they should be allocated a certain number of hours to spend on this.
 - Leiden University: at the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, certain departments have an appointed graduate mentor that speaks to PhD candidates

² <https://hetpnn.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/PhD-regulations-in-the-Netherlands.pdf>

on an individual basis. This is generally a senior faculty member at the department that is not part of the management team.

- Radboudumc, Donders Institute: each PhD candidate is appointed an independent mentor, who is in no way directly or indirectly involved in the research being conducted by the (group of the) PhD candidate. This mentor can be called upon whenever the PhD candidate considers it necessary, but has no formal position in the PhD trajectory.
- LUMC: every PhD candidate has a guidance committee.³ This committee consists of at least two independent researchers not directly involved in the PhD who can supply feedback and guidance.

3. Facilities

- A PhD psychologist or counselor should be available for all PhD candidates free of charge, no matter their employment status. If the waiting list for this psychologist/counselor is too long, PhD candidates should be able to get costs for psychological help reimbursed.
 - University of Twente: a PhD/EngD counselor is available to all PhD candidates, irrespective of contract type.⁴
 - Leiden University, Utrecht University/ UMC Utrecht: a PhD psychologist is available to all PhD candidates, irrespective of contract type.^{5 6}
 - University of Amsterdam: all PhD candidates can make an appointment with the student psychologist.
 - Erasmus University / Erasmus MC: PhD candidates who are employed or who have a guest agreement, have access to the services of OpenUp, providing direct online access to certified psychologists.⁷
- Every PhD candidate should have access to the same courses and facilities, regardless of employment status.
 - Erasmus MC, LUMC, University of Groningen, Utrecht University: every PhD candidate registered in the PhD tracking system has access to all courses offered by the institute in question. There is no differentiation between employed, scholarship or external candidates.
- PhD candidates should be made aware of the minimum budget available for the education and professional development of the candidate (e.g. courses, conferences, research budget). This should be an annual topic of conversation.
 - Wageningen University: it must be specified in the Training and Supervision Plan (TSP) how the PhD candidate plans to spend the budget that is available for 'learning activities'.⁸

³ <https://www.laplumc.org/phd-folder>

⁴ <https://www.utwente.nl/en/ces/sacc/coaching-counselling/phd-counsellor>

⁵ <https://www.organisatiegids.universiteitleiden.nl/en/service-units/student-and-educational-affairs/student-support-services/psychologists/phd-psychologist>

⁶ <https://students.uu.nl/en/schedule-an-appointment-with-phd-psychologist>

⁷ <https://www.eur.nl/en/news/openup-open-all-and-always-within-24-hours>

⁸ <https://www.wur.nl/en/Education-Programmes/PhD-Programme/Graduate-Schools/Wageningen-School-of-Social-Sciences/PhD-candidates/TSP-and-monitoring.htm>

4. The PhD trajectory: from start to finish

- Each PhD candidate should be registered in the registration system as soon as they start their trajectory. Progress should be tracked and checked, ideally by someone not involved in the PhD trajectory.
 - University of Groningen: the TSP should be updated every year.
 - LUMC: an annual progress report has to be written, signed off by both PhD candidate and supervisor, and uploaded to the PhD tracking system.
 - Erasmus MC: an annual progress report has to be written and uploaded to the PhD tracking system, after which it is approved by the supervisor.
- An exit interview should take place when a PhD candidate finishes or quits their trajectory. This should happen regardless of whether the candidate successfully completes the trajectory, whether the supervisors of the candidate decide to terminate the trajectory early (e.g. at the go/no-go moment) or whether the candidate themselves decides to quit.
 - University of Twente: everyone who finishes their PhD trajectory gets an exit interview. Everyone who quits their trajectory early gets an invitation for an exit interview.⁹
- It should be acknowledged that the responsibility to finish a PhD on time is a shared responsibility of both candidate *and* supervisor. It should be made clear at the start of a PhD trajectory what the options are if a candidate takes longer to finish their PhD than their contract / guest agreement lasts.
- Every PhD candidate should have access to funds for graduation formalities (including the printing of thesis books). It should be clear how much money is available and how much these formalities generally cost. This budget should remain available regardless of the time a candidate takes to finish: this means that for an employed PhD candidate, the budget should remain available even if the contract ends before the defense takes place. The amount should be the same for any PhD candidate defending at a Dutch institution: employed, bursary and external.

5. Non-employed PhD candidates

- The differences between the different types of PhD candidates (employed/bursary/external¹⁰), and the corresponding rights and responsibilities, should be listed in a concise and publicly available overview. Potential PhD candidates should be pointed to this overview before the start of their trajectory.
 - University of Groningen: a clear overview of the rights and conditions of the different PhD types is available.¹¹

⁹ <https://www.utwente.nl/en/education/tgs/currentcandidates/phd/downloads/phd-charter-english.pdf>

¹⁰ All institutes should thereby stick to the type definitions as outlined by UNL:

https://www.universiteitennederland.nl/files/documenten/Nieuwsberichten/Een_gezonde_praktijk_in_het_Nederlandse_promotiestelsel.pdf

¹¹ <https://www.rug.nl/education/phd-programmes/phd-scholarship-programme/conditions-application/overview-conditions-phd-students-ug-en.pdf>

- Each PhD candidate who does not have an employment contract should have a detailed guest agreement, which should at least include a list of facilities and services available, allotted supervision time, access to courses, budget for conferences and a personal budget for other research expenses. It should also provide an overview of the candidate's rights and responsibilities or refer to a document in which these are given, similar to the collective labor agreement for employed candidates.
- In principle, PhD candidates should not have to pay an annual fee ('bench fee') to conduct their doctoral research. If it is demanded, the amount should be justified: it should be clear what is covered by the fee and what rights it gives to the PhD candidate.
 - Utrecht University: no bench fee is charged.

6. Representation and co-participation

- PhD candidates should be able to participate in faculty- or institute-wide PhD organizations, councils and co-participation bodies. This could for example be accomplished by reducing the term of the university/faculty council to 2 years, as this would make it easier for PhD candidates (and postdocs) to participate.
 - Leiden University: internal PhD candidates are allowed to participate in all co-participation bodies. The terms for the university and faculty councils are 2 years.
 - Utrecht University: for PhD candidates, the term of the university council is reduced to 2 years. Both employed and bursary PhD candidates receive an extension for their work in the council.
- All PhD candidates, no matter their employment status, should have active and passive voting rights for university and faculty council elections.
- PhD candidates should be compensated for the time they spend on representation and co-participation bodies. In most cases, this compensation should be granted in the form of a contract extension, as PhD candidates generally do not benefit from a reduction in teaching tasks or other compensatory measures.
 - Leiden University: PhD candidates receive a contract extension for their work on the university or faculty council.¹²

¹²<https://www.organisatiegids.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/ul2staff/reglementen/bestuur-en-organisatie/faciliteitenregeling-university-council-faculty-councils-and-employee-councils-2022-en.pdf>