



## Strategic Plan 2024

### PhD candidates Network Netherlands

#### **Board members**

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Lotte Weedage (Secretary)

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Ana Barbosa Mendes (Labour conditions - External, international and scholarship PhD candidates)

Margrietha van der Linde (Labour conditions - Hospitals)

Anna Roodhof (Recognition and Rewards, Open Science)

Marie Stadel (Wellbeing)

## Introduction

PhD candidates form the largest group of (early career) researchers in the Netherlands<sup>1</sup>, and *Promovendi Netwerk Nederland* (PhD network Netherlands, PNN) is the Dutch national advocate for the rights and interests of these PhD candidates. PNN focuses on, among other things, improving social safety and labour conditions and giving input on policy on recognition and rewards and open science. The members of PNN (PhD organisations - POs) feed and influence the topics that PNN works on through the signals they get from within universities, UMCs and other workplaces for PhD candidates. Gathering the signals that PNN has been getting over the past year(s), the board of PNN has written a strategic plan for the upcoming year, which you can read below.

In the past year, PNN focused on one specific group of PhD candidates: international scholarship PhD candidates. PNN has gotten signals for many years about the working *and* living conditions for this type of PhD candidates, and decided to gain more insight into this. Our [monitor](#) shows that the financial situation of international scholarship PhD candidates is alarming - often their scholarship is only 70% of the Dutch minimum wage - and that they are being treated very differently than employed PhD candidates in the Netherlands. We recommended that - on the long term - international scholarship PhD candidates should be employed in order to make sure that their working and living conditions are (almost) identical to those of all other PhD candidates. We will continue our efforts to improve the circumstances of international scholarship PhD candidates in the coming year.

In addition to the scholarship PhD monitor, PNN has continued to focus on other core topics. From recommendations about what good [PhD policy entails](#), drawing attention to the [wellbeing of early career researchers](#), to [workshops on open science](#) - PNN has been able to place attention on most areas of interest to PhD candidates. We are especially proud of the connection with our members which we have been improving since ties were weakened during the Covid-19 pandemic. One good example is our yearly [PO-day](#) during which PhD representatives from all over the Netherlands gathered together to discuss matters that are currently being discussed at many universities or UMCs, and we look forward to continuing this tradition.

From looking back to looking ahead: in the following document you will read more about our goals for the upcoming year. PNN will focus on the sustainability of the PhD trajectory: we will gain insight into typical PhD trajectories in the Netherlands to examine to what extent these are still doable in four years, and look into the responsibilities of the involved parties: right now, the responsibility often lies solely with the PhD candidate. Further, we aim to become more recognised among all PhD candidates, not just PhD representatives, and to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rathenau.nl/nl/wetenschap-cijfers/wetenschappers/van-promovendus-tot-promotie>

improve our advocacy power. We look forward to working on these topics, in collaboration with our partners.

## A sustainable PhD trajectory

The PhD trajectory represents a period during which a junior researcher learns and develops to become an independent researcher, under the supervision of competent researchers ((co-)promoters). During this phase, the PhD candidate acquires knowledge and a broad set of skills relevant to different research career paths, while also contributing to science with original, high quality research. Right now, the average contract time of (employed) PhD candidates is four years. Yet, most PhD candidates are unable to finish the final requirements - often the dissertation - within those four years. Unfortunately, data about finishing rates among PhD candidates is outdated<sup>2</sup> or unavailable.

Various factors can prevent PhD candidates from finishing on time: the workload might be too high or there are personal circumstances which do not allow PhD candidates to work on their PhD for the allotted time. In the coming year we aim to gain insight into the main factors that play a role in finishing a PhD on time.

Currently, the responsibilities of finishing a PhD project often rest on the shoulders of the individual PhD candidate: they are in many cases solely responsible for the final product. We strongly believe that finishing a PhD trajectory is a joint effort between the PhD candidate, their institution and supervisors, with responsibilities for each party. Our recommendations, based on the insights we will gain about finishing rates and factors that play a role in finishing, will therefore closely link to PhD supervision and responsibility of all parties.

There are three main routes that we will take to achieve these goals:

### 1. Obtain finishing rates of PhD candidates

We will gain insight into the *objective* properties of a PhD trajectory by gathering data from institutions (UMCs, universities and research institutes) on, amongst others, the standard duration of a PhD trajectory, but also the number of contract extensions and the dropout rates of PhD candidates.

### 2. Gather experiences of PhD candidates

We want to better understand the diverse experiences of all PhD candidates (employed, scholarship, external, etc) at all research institutions and improve our knowledge about what factors are important for PhD candidates to successfully complete their PhD in time. We will organise, in collaboration with the POs, focus

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.rathenau.nl/nl/wetenschap-cijfers/wetenschappers/van-promovendus-tot-promotie>

groups at the different institutions in order to understand and learn more about the experiences of PhD candidates during their PhD trajectory.

### 3. Establish the responsibilities

Apart from the PhD candidate themselves, their supervisors, institutions and graduate schools play a big role in a successful PhD trajectory. We will establish *good practices* in terms of shared responsibility to finish the PhD project, and explore what good PhD supervision should look like based on the outcomes of the above goals, discussions with supervisors and/or established researchers and the MCSA guidelines on PhD supervision<sup>3</sup>.

## Visibility

It is important to maintain and improve the visibility of PNN towards both individual PhD candidates and policy making bodies to be able to make change and support and represent PhD candidates. By improving the visibility of PNN through social media, institutions and our POs we want to make sure that every PhD candidate knows what PNN is and what we stand for. Furthermore, in order to make PNN's representative role more effective and active, we aim to develop a clear plan on how we can effectively advocate for the rights of PhD candidates. We will maintain and improve our contacts with the policy making bodies like UNL, NFU, and the ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW). In this way, PNN can put important topics such as PhD supervision, workload and wellbeing on the agenda.

1. **Visibility of PNN towards individual PhD candidates:** Right now, PNN represents PhD interests mainly by gathering input from member organisations. However, not all PhD candidates are active in POs, and PNN aims to represent the interests of all PhD candidates. To do so, it is important that individual PhD candidates are aware of the work PNN does and the way PhD representation is structured in the Netherlands. We therefore want to increase our visibility and the communication of our activities and achievements towards PhDs. As a consequence, we hope that PhD representative bodies grow and obtain more PhD candidates who would then like to become active in PhD representation as well.
  - a. *Online presence:* We will continue with our efforts on social media and the newsletter to let PhD candidates know about PhD representation in the Netherlands. We will post on social media about for example important items in the collective labour agreement and interesting events/workshops/reads for PhD candidates. Moreover, we will maintain the PNN website with up-to-date and easily accessible information, and also make sure that PhD candidates know where to find our website.

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<sup>3</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, *Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions guidelines on supervision*, Publications Office, 2021, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/508311>

- b. *Institutional presence*: At the institutional level, we will work with the local POs and with the graduate schools, for example by organising a workshop on "Know your rights" or mental wellbeing, to increase our visibility.
  - c. *Visibility at events*: We will actively participate in activities organised by POs and by activities for PhD candidates to show what PNN is and what we can do for PhD candidates.
2. **Visibility PNN towards policy makers**: We aim to improve the effectiveness of our contact with policy makers at universities, UMCs, OCW, political parties and members of parliament.
- a. *Dutch politics*: We will create an overview of the vision of political parties on topics related to PhD candidates in the Netherlands (e.g. internationalisation, social safety in higher education) and pursue contact with newly elected members of parliament to portray our interests (i.e. by organising a contact moment with them).
  - a. *Lobby training*: The board of PNN will follow a training to work on their advocacy strategy. This strategy should include an overview of stakeholders, opportunities to advocate for PhDs in the political cycle and a concrete plan should follow afterwards.
  - b. *External contacts*: The board of PNN has good working relationships with the ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW), the association for universities (UNL) and other stakeholders in the policy field. We wish to continue and improve those relationships by meeting regularly and setting clear expectations. When new stakeholders arise, for example at the European level, we will establish similar working relationships by being proactive and present towards these partners.

## Relationship between POs and PNN

PNN is an association whose members are the local PhD organisations (POs). To ensure PNN represents the interests of all PhD candidates in the Netherlands, it is vital that our relationship with the POs is strong and that there is a regular exchange of information between POs and PNN. Furthermore, PNN aims to facilitate POs in taking steps to improve policy around PhD matters in the local context. Therefore, PNN continuously aims to improve its relationship with the POs.

1. **Communication and representation**: We would like to explicitly focus on maintaining and improving existing communication lines with our POs and to improve our representative power by reaching out to groups that are less represented in the current system such as PhDs at universities of applied sciences (*hbo*) or vocational education (*mbo*).

- a. *Contact person*: Each PNN board member will be the designated contact person for two or three POs, and will actively maintain contact with this PO. We hope that such a contact person helps lowering the threshold for POs to approach PNN and vice versa as we think maintaining good contact with POs helps both the PO and PNN in identifying problems early and effectively working together. PNN board members will visit their POs, schedule check-in/feedback calls and be the contact point when local issues arise that require PNN's support, reach out to them over the phone and offer feedback.
  - b. *Tour de PO*: To keep up with local developments, PNN wants to schedule a meeting with each PO once a year - the so-called '*Tour de PO*'. With the introduction of a contact person, the PNN contact person takes care of scheduling a Tour de PO with their POs with the aim of having one in-person meeting per year. At the end of next year, we would like to have visited all POs at least once.
  - c. *Be in contact with all local PhD representation*: PNN aims to be in active contact with most PhD candidates via their local POs, but there are also initiatives with whom we are not in contact yet, i.e. *Platform promovoren in het mbo*. We aim to establish communication with these initiatives and encourage groups that are not yet organised to form their own representative groups.
  - d. *Represent all types of PhD candidates*: The PhD community in the Netherlands is diverse. We aim to improve the representation of PhD candidates not affiliated at a university of UMC, such as PhD candidates at a research institutes, hbo's, mbo's, PhD candidates at peripheral hospitals and externally-funded PhD candidates. Next to representation of all PhDs, we will also explore whether we can and should represent related programs, such as the Engineering Doctorate program at technical universities and the Professional Doctorate program at universities of applied sciences.
2. **Facilitate POs to best fulfil their work in the local context**: Since PNN is an association with POs as its members, one of the main goals of PNN is to support POs in their work. We aim to assist them in their work as well as possible, and next to that we want to be a platform for them where they can discuss with other POs about problems/positive things they encounter.
- a. *Information guide(s) for POs*: We want to open the discussion with our members: what do they need in order to be active and effective POs? We will help them with an overview on what the national advocacy for PhD interests entails whilst at the same time making clear how we can assist them on institutional level and where our paths meet.
  - b. *Network events*: During our annual PO-day, POs meet and learn from each other. We wish to continue this event and look into the possibilities of expanding either the PO-day (i.e., also invite faculty PhD council members or organising it more frequently) or hosting additional network events. We keep

organising the pre-GMM session, the Tour de PO, and Know Your Rights sessions as a place for discussion and input.

- c. *Compensation*: We believe that being compensated for the time you spend on your work in a PhD council is crucial. That is why we want to continue the conversation with our national partners about structural compensation for this work. We also aim to provide an overview of the most frequently used forms of compensation right now, and how POs can lobby for this locally.

## 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 our mission and this strategic plan, we will, in collaboration with our partners and our members, continue working towards a future proof and sustainable research climate in the Netherlands.