

Research plan "From start to submission"

This project is carried out by the board of the [Promovendi Netwerk Nederland \(PNN\)](#). Board members from the PNN board directly involved in the project are:

- Benthe van Wanrooij (PNN chair, voorzitter@hetpnn.nl)
- Lotte Weedage (PNN vice chair & secretary, secretaris@hetpnn.nl)
- Marie Stadel (Portfolio wellbeing, wellbeing@hetpnn.nl)

Additionally, we have hired a student assistant: Ellen Stroemer, Master student at the University of Groningen (focusgroups@hetpnn.nl). Ellen will assist with 1) practical organisation of focus group discussions and 2) qualitative data analysis.

We are conducting this project in collaboration with our members, the PhD organisations at universities, university medical centres and research institutions who can help us organise focus groups and recruit local PhD candidates.

Goal of this research

Most doctoral students currently require 60 months (5 years) to write a dissertation¹. At the same time, there is often only an employment contract or other working agreement for 4 years. Thus, there seems to be a mismatch between the actual length of the PhD trajectory and the contract length given for it. There are several implications of this: Not only does it seem to have an impact on the perceived workload and well-being of the PhD candidate, it also affects the PhD candidate's position on the labour market after completion of the contract. Promovendi Netwerk Nederland (PNN), supported by the [SoFoKleS fund](#), therefore wants to get a better understanding of the factors that enable or hinder PhDs in completing their trajectory in 4 years.

The main results of this study will be summarised in a written report (planned release in March 2025) published on the PNN website and shared with other national stakeholders such as UNL or NFU.

Participants

We would like to recruit PhD candidates at different Dutch institutions to conduct a total of 12 focus groups discussion, each with 5-10 candidates. We will advertise this project via the PNN social media channels (LinkedIn, X), website and newsletter. Additionally, we will ask our member organisations to distribute the call for participants at their local institutions.

In the call for participants we will include a direct link to the sign-up questionnaire with some basic questions about the PhD candidate (e.g., stage of the PhD project, research field, estimated finish date, institution they do their PhD at, contract type).

Based on the answers to this questionnaire we will compose 12 focus groups and invite a selection of candidates to join the discussion. The goal is that PhDs from a similar field / institution / PhD stage can be in the same focus group, but that we cover a broad range of the PhD population in the Netherlands across the focus groups. Relevant factors for the sample and focus group composition are: current PhD / recent alumni, field of research, institution, PhD contract type (employed, scholarship), international / Dutch nationality, demographics (gender, age, living situation) and whether they were/will be able to finish their PhD in time.

Participants will receive no compensation for their participation. However, their travel costs will be reimbursed. During the focus group drinks and snacks will be provided.

¹ Rathenau. (n.d.) *Van promovendus tot promotie*.
<https://www.rathenau.nl/nl/wetenschap-cijfers/wetenschappers/van-promovendus-tot-promotie#:~:text=ln%202021%20waren%2036.472%20promovendi,75%25%20de%20promotie%20succesvol%20af.>

Methodology

We will conduct 12 focus groups, 3 each per area:

- **Rotterdam**/Den Haag/Leiden
- Amsterdam/**Utrecht**
- Tilburg/Maastricht/**Eindhoven**
- **Groningen**

PhD candidates will be invited according to the procedure described above. One discussion will last 90 minutes and will be led by the project coordinator with help from a student assistant. All focus groups will be audio recorded and notes will be taken. In case we do not reach saturation in terms of participant diversity with these planned groups, additional discussions may be added.

All recordings will be transcribed and thematically analysed using ATLAS (or similar qualitative analysis software). Then a descriptive report will be written. All focus groups will be conducted by the same researchers according to the previously specified discussion guide.

Risk

No foreseeable harm. However, one thing that we have to pay close attention to is the risk of identifying participants in the data/report. In order to minimise risk of identification of individual participants outside of the research team and other focus group participants, we will only report summary information in our report and only select specific quotes that are sufficiently anonymised.

Consent process

Already at the online sign-up questionnaire assessing basic characteristics of the candidate we will provide a short information form about the study. Then participants will be asked for consent to process the data they provide via the questionnaire and that based on that we will decide to invite candidates to a focus group.

At the start of the focus group participants will be fully informed about the purpose of the focus group as well as the way we collect, store, analyse and report on the data. Each participant will be asked to provide written informed consent.

Appendix A: Sign-up questionnaire

Link to the Sign-up questionnaire:

https://uva.fra1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_ehZ9imLoAbV22Oy

Appendix B: Discussion guide

Introduction:

- Who are we (PNN)?
- What is the purpose/goal of this meeting?
- Short disclaimer how this group was composed / some conversation rules?
- Inform about audio recording of the meeting
- What will we do with the obtained information?
 - Short summary after for approval
 - transcription/analysis + report writing (with summary and anonymised quotes) -> opportunity to provide feedback

Hand out information and consent forms - let participants ask questions and then sign them

Short introduction round (all the participants) + opening questions:

- Name + institution
- Field & research topic?

Another round:

- Why did you choose to be here?

Question Prompts for Discussion:

What are the core parts of your day to day PhD (work) life?

What does your day look like as a PhD?

What takes up most of your time?

What is your goal in your PhD?

When do you consider a PhD trajectory a success?

What would you like to learn/achieve during your PhD?

When do you know you reached your goal?

How do you know you are done with your PhD?

How do you know a thesis is completed?

What do your supervisors think constitutes a completed PhD?

What do your supervisors think constitutes a successful PhD?

What do you think your supervisors require from you before you can submit your thesis?

What does your graduate school require from you before you can submit your thesis?

What are the problems/ delays you encountered?

Which parts took longer than expected?

Which parts of the PhD do/did you have most trouble with?

What specific factors of xyz had an impact on your PhD trajectory?

What or who enables you to successfully work on your PhD / helps you to "finish line"?

What are things that give you energy / keep you motivated during your PhD?

What tasks/activities in your PhD do you value the most?

Which tasks/activities in your PhD are valued by your peers and supervisors?

- Within your department / research group: how does your experience compare to other PhD trajectories?
- What are your tasks this week?
- What do you consider research related tasks?

(Prompts might be formulated differently for PhD candidates/ Alumni)