



PhD advice

This guide summarizes the most important points on how to survive your PhD. The EPS PhD council collected helpful information for beginning and finishing PhD candidates and wants to share some advice on how to succeed in your PhD.

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Starting a PhD

Starting a PhD is exciting, but it can also be overwhelming. Here, we summarize a few aspects that can help you to get started.

Supervision & support:

Each supervisor works differently, so it is important to learn how to work with yours. Use your Training & Supervision Plan (TSP) as a tool to discuss with your supervisor(s) how you will arrange things between you, what your obligations are, and what should definitely go into your training plan:

How often will we meet officially?

Which meetings am I expected to attend?

Can I stop by the office any time?

What is the policy on coffee and lunch breaks?

Prepare meetings with your supervisor in advance and make a list of questions.

Use the yearly evaluation meeting (e.g. Result/Performance & Development interview (R&D/P&D); in Dutch Resultaat & Ontwikkelingsgesprek (R&O)) as an opportunity to discuss problems and your plans.

Try to actively decide on your external advisor. They can help you to solve issues with your direct supervisors. They do not necessarily have to be part of EPS and can be employed in a different field of expertise.

Project planning:

Take responsibility for your project and embrace failures as challenges and training exercises for future successes.

Make sure to update your project plans according to new developments and new insights.

Work packages give you a guideline in your PhD project, but are not binding. If experiments do not yield results or may never work out you are allowed to include experiments that were not initially in the proposal.

Find the right balance for the level of your experiments. Focus not only on fancy and difficult experiments.

Ask your supervisor for low hanging fruit when your main project is not proceeding as planned. They often know a few simple

experiments that have to be done to make a story of a previous PhD candidate complete.

Teaching & supervision load:

Teaching and supervision duties should not exceed 10-15% of the four-year workload. This is dependent on the university.

If these duties clearly exceed this limit and become more and more a routine job that have no direct link with the learning objectives or the research project, a clear agreement on compensation for the surplus work is needed.

Use your TSP to discuss and plan the amount and type of these duties for you.

Scholarship, sandwich and guest PhDs usually do not have an obligation to teach, so make sure to discuss adequate compensation in either contract time or salary when you are asked to take on some teaching and supervision duties.

Writing:

Writing should not be kept for the last year of your PhD. Start writing parts of your thesis

as soon as you have the data. Moreover, the introduction of an experimental paper can already be written before having obtained the data.

Be aware that at some universities a review/ opinion paper can only be used as the introduction chapter for your thesis if you are the only author.

You can find different writing courses or writing support groups at your local university or via EPS to help guide you through the process of writing your first article.

Organization/ structure:

A data management plan may not be the first thing you think of when starting your PhD, though maybe you should. Most of our results from the lab are analysed and/or summarized on a computer. Think of a data structure to store and find your valuable data and ask your supervisor if your group has a data management plan. Also, make sure that files can be found using your (electronic) lab book.

The OneDrive can be connected to your computer so that you directly work in the document. It has 1 TB free storage and stores your data safely. It also allows to share files with your colleagues.

One great tool to structure your thoughts and to discuss ideas is a mind map. Many webtools allow you to draw mind maps that visualize your thoughts as you go along.

Planning is very important to work constructively. Trello is a great tool to organize your days and to work alone or in teams on your to-do lists. It is one of many ways to structure your work packages.

Employment conditions & HR tools:

For contract PhD candidates it can be useful to know your rights and obligations. The most important information on employment conditions, personal development, leave, occupational health and safety, your employment contract, and pension options can be found here:
www.caouniversiteiten.nl/en/.

Contract PhD candidates have various benefits they can get by exchanging salary or holiday hours for *e.g.* travel compensation or a bike. In addition, universities may also refund expenses made for sport items and a bike. Holiday hours can be sold as well, but keep in mind that there is a maximum amount of hours that can be used for these options. The advantage of using salary for these benefits, is that no income taxes are paid for the used salary. Exact details may vary between institutions and we advise to find the regulations applying for you.

Health:

Information about activities and facilities that can help candidates to become, and remain, physically and mentally healthy can be found on the EPS website: www.graduateschool-eps.info/contact/support/.

Confidential counsellors and occupational social work for all universities of EPS can also be found on this page.

For PhD advice you can contact Susan Urbanus (EPS) or a local advisor at your university that is listed below.

- Leiden University: Jan Boersema (boersema@cml.leidenuniv.nl)
- Radboud University Nijmegen: vertrouwenspersonen@ru.nl can refer you to the right person for your question.
- University of Groningen: Corine Eising (c.m.eising@rug.nl)
- Utrecht University: Freek Appels (f.v.w.appels@uu.nl)
- University of Amsterdam: www.extranet.uva.nl/content/a-z/vertrouwenspersonen/vertrouwenspersonen.html lists several contact persons. If you are not sure to whom to go, Martijn Rep (m.rep@uva.nl) can probably help you further.
- Wageningen University & Research: Susan Urbanus (susan.urbanus@wur.nl)

Online learning:

There are many possibilities to learn from and connect with fellow plant biologists online. Here we show a list of sources for online courses and seminars:

PLANTAE is the online home for the global plant science community. Check it out to find

webinars, podcasts or to connect with other plant scientists.

Online courses can be found at www.edx.org and www.coursera.org. You can receive ECTS for your TSP under certain circumstances. Please contact the EPS PhD programme coordinator, Susan Urbanus, if you have questions about this.

The European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) offers an online learning platform for basic research in molecular biology.

Wrapping up

Finishing a PhD in time can be stressful and tiring. Here, we summarize a few aspects that can help you to wrap up.

Writing:

Decide for yourself if writing your research article is more important than finishing your PhD thesis in time. For your future path it might be more important to finish the article over finishing in time with your PhD project – given that you want to continue research in your PhD topic or want to pursue an academic career.

Please be aware that the regulations from the different universities on the PhD thesis content are usually rather unspecific about the amount of chapters and publication requirements. Nonetheless, chair groups often have a certain expectation of the thesis content, which could be more ambitious than what the university actually requires. The hurdle to take is to convince your supervisor(s) that your thesis is good enough to send to the reading committee. It pays to check what the PhD thesis regulations for your university are and what your fellow

PhDs have in their final thesis. The regulations for each university affiliated with EPS can be found here: www.graduateschool-eps.info/phd/doctorate-conferral-regulations.

You can find different writing courses or writing support groups at your local university or via EPS to help guide you through the process of process of writing your first article.

End of contract:

At least one month before the contract ends, your employer should inform you in writing about the end of the contract and whether they wish to extend the contract, and if so, under what conditions. When late with sending you this notification or no (written) notification at all, the employer must pay you a notification fee (compensation) worth maximum one month gross salary or a part of this. Please note that you will probably have to ask for this compensation yourself. If the employer declines to pay the compensation, you will have maximum two months after the end of your contract to claim your money via court (Kantonrechter).

Left over vacation hours:

If you have left-over vacation hours and can prove that you have not received the opportunity to take them up by the end of the contract, you have the right to 'sell' them to your employer (including the build-up of vacation hours and 13th month bonus that comes with it). Be aware that holidays in excess of the statutory entitlement cannot be transferred to the next year.

Transition Compensation:

Every employee has the right to a transition compensation at the end of the contract. For the rules and a calculation of the amount, please check the site from the Rijksoverheidsdienst (in Dutch only). You will receive this transition compensation automatically and this does not affect your unemployment (WW) benefits.

Unemployment (WW) benefits:

You may be eligible for unemployment benefits. In this case, you must register first at UWV WERKbedrijf in your region. You can do this through the website www.werk.nl. This

must be done within two days following the end of your employment. After this you can apply for unemployment benefits online.

You may also be eligible for additional unemployment benefits under the Netherlands Universities Enhanced Unemployment Scheme (BWNU).

Read more about both types of unemployment benefits and how to request them here:

www.caouniversiteiten.nl/en/termination-of-employment/werkloos.