

This guide summarizes the most important advice on how to progress through your PhD. The EPS PhD council collected this helpful information, with a focus on beginning and finishing PhD candidates and wants to share some advice on how to succeed in your PhD.

Supervision & support

Each supervisor – and each PhD candidate - works differently, so it is important to learn how you will collaborate. 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. Discuss the more formal, but also informal parts of the trajectory, like: *How often will we meet officially? Which meetings am I expected to attend? Can I stop by the office any time? What do I do if I encounter any issues?* Prepare meetings with your supervisor in advance for example by making a list of questions and be sure to also express what you need and what works well for you when working together.

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 give your supervisors feedback and to discuss progress, problems and your plans.

In the scenario where working with your (daily) supervisor does not work out, and the issues cannot be solved, it might in some cases be possible to make changes to the supervision team. To learn more you can talk to the confidential advisor of EPS (or your local graduate school).

The mentor

Try to actively decide on who will be your mentor, and meet up regularly and from the start of the PhD trajectory. In this way, the mentor also already builds a good understanding of your trajectory, progress and needs and can help you spot issues before they arise or become a real problem. With the mentor, you can reflect on your PhD trajectory, wellbeing, and the collaboration with your supervisor(s). They can also help you to solve issues with your direct supervisor(s). Conversations with an experienced scientist like your mentor can also help you get more insights into the academic career path, and is an ideal opportunity for career planning. The mentor does 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 learning experiences and training exercises for future successes. Make sure to update your project plans according to new developments and new insights, which might also mean you'll have to leave out an experiment that you originally planned. Always discuss with your supervisor; in general the thesis requirements of your institution and the 4-year deadline can help you determine what to still do and what does not fit the planning anymore.

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. There might be an available dataset that is not yet

analysed, or a set of already done experiments that would fit in your PhD project storyline where you can contribute with some extra work.

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, plan and keep track of the amount and type of these duties for you.

Scholarship, sandwich and guest PhDs usually do not have an obligation to teach or supervise students, but they can take on some teaching or supervision duties on a voluntary basis as part of their training, if they are interested in these type of activities. If scholarship, sandwich or guest PhDs get asked to take on some teaching and/or supervision duties, they should inquire whether adequate compensation in either contract time or salary is (legally) possible at their university..

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 or thesis chapter.

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.

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

Planning is very important to work constructively. For example Trello or Todoist are great tools 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. Pomofocus can help you divide your tasks into 25-minute chunks to help you plan your day.

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.

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: 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.

Non-contract PhDs

For non-contract PhDs the best place to start if you have questions is your local graduate school or PhD office/Doctoral Service Center (depending on your institution). WUR has a document that outlines the differences between contract types and the benefits or limitations that come with those, you can find it in the grey box on this page: www.wur.nl/en/education-programmes/phd-programme/about-the-phd-programme/phd-candidate-categories.htm. Please be aware they could be different for your university, but this graph might already provide some insights in what to look out for .

Working fewer than 38-40 hours per week

Did you know that at the Dutch Universities it is possible to change the amount of hours on your contract? Either by using the possibility for flexible working hours, or by working less than 1 FTE (Fulltime equivalent). Lowering your FTE will lower your salary but will also push the end of your contract forward to a future date, so you will still have the equivalent of 4 years of fulltime working in total. Changing the flexible working hours in your work week by plus or minus 2 hours, will not change your salary, but will change the amount of holiday/compensation hours per year. Extra compensation hours due to working an additional 2 hours per week should be used in the same year that they arose. For reference, in case of a fulltime employment of 38 hours, the number of holiday hours per calendar year are 232 hours (about 6 weeks). For an overview of the amount of hours and holiday hour build-up you can have a look at the Collective Labour Agreement of the Dutch Universities ([Download Appendix G, Variable working week, cao Nederlandse Universiteiten](#)). You will have to discuss these options with your supervisor and HR for an agreement.

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:

Annemarie Meijer

Confidential counsellor for PhD candidates in the Faculty of Science

a.h.meijer@biology.leidenuniv.nl

Radboud University Nijmegen:

Lara de Die

Coordinator of the RIBES Graduate School

lara.dedie@ru.nl

vertrouwenspersonen@ru.nl

can refer you to the right [confidential advisor](#) for your question

University of Groningen:

Corine Eising

PhD coordinator GELIFES

c.m.eising@rug.nl

Marjolein Renker

Confidential advisor

m.h.i.renker@rug.nl

Utrecht University:

Hao Zhang

Programme coordinator IEB

IEBPhD.coordinator@uu.nl

Freek Appels

Confidential advisor for PhD candidates of the Faculty of Science

f.v.w.appels@uu.nl

University of Amsterdam:

The [Social Safety UvA website](#) lists several contact persons.

If you are not sure to whom to go, Martijn Rep (m.rep@uva.nl) can probably help you further.

VU University:

Rick Bethlem

PhD candidate advisor for Physics & Astronomy

h.l.bethlem@vu.nl

Andrea Baldi

PhD candidate advisor for Physics & Astronomy

a.baldi@vu.nl

Wageningen University & Research:

Susan Urbanus

PhD programme coordinator & PhD advisor EPS

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 EPS 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 the PhD

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.

The universities affiliated with EPS are working on providing more clear regulations on the PhD thesis content, like the amount of chapters and publication requirements. For some institutions, these regulations are already available on www.graduateschool-eps.info/phd/doctoral-degree-regulations-thesis-requirements/, others will follow.

Chair groups often also 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 had in their thesis when they sent it to the reading committee, or what they have in their final thesis.

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 (for employed PhD candidates)

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 (for employed PhD candidates)

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.