

PhD candidate advisor profile and tasks

About this document

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Departmental PhD candidate advisor - Faculty of Science

Profile and tasks PhD candidate advisor at departments of Faculty of Science

Based on the VU-wide [policy](#), a specific faculty policy for the profile and tasks of the PhD candidate advisor at Faculty of Science is developed. The PhD candidate advisor should support all PhD candidates involved in a [doctoral research trajectory](#), including PhD candidates with employee status, junior lecturers with a promotion trajectory, PhD candidates with a scholarship or grant, and optionally (if desired by the PhD candidate) externally financed PhD candidates, and external PhD candidates (self-funded).

Please note that the role of PhD candidate advisor fits very well with the VU's vision on [Recognition and Rewards](#), and provides the opportunity to develop and show leadership.

Tasks:

- One-hour conversation in year 1, midterm and at exit with each PhD candidate with a promotion trajectory about well-being, progress and work trajectory at the VU;
- Optionally organize group discussion with 5 to 6 PhD candidates (1x per year) with follow-up according to conclusions/wishes from the group. External PhD candidates may be excluded from these group discussions;
- Be available for meetings initiated by the PhD candidate or by the PhD council when needed;
- Refer PhD candidate to appropriate help: HRM, PhD psychologist, VU housing service etc;
- Annual written reportingⁱ to dean, PhD coordinators, department heads and managers and PhD council, see appendix 1 for format;
- Participate in a faculty and university network of PhD candidate advisors for intervision.

Profile:

The PhD candidate advisor:

- Is a permanent staff member with a PhD;
- Is independent with respect to the PhD and is therefore not acting as a supervisor involved in the PhD track in question;
- Can empathize with the position of PhD candidates;
- Has an understanding of the governance of the organization;
- Is available as external PhD candidate advisor upon request of a PhD candidate or PhD candidate advisor from another department.

Organization & Appointment:

- The PhD candidate advisor will be appointed by the Faculty board and nominated by the Department head for a period of four years, optionally to be extended once;
- The PhD candidate advisor will receive a training in mental support, e.g. the course 'Oog voor (sociale) veiligheid', offered by HRM;
- Each department has preferably at least two PhD candidate advisors to secure independency towards the PhD candidate;
- The role of PhD candidate advisor can be combined with other roles, e.g. (departmental) confidential advisor or PhD coordinator, this may also concern other already existing roles in departments with overlapping tasks;
- The PhD coordinator of the PhD candidate is responsible for the assignment of a PhD candidate advisor at start of the PhD trajectory, and the PhD candidate will include this in the Teaching and Supervision Plan;
- Externally financed PhD candidates and self-funded external PhD candidates will be asked whether they wish a PhD candidate advisor at start of their PhD trajectory by their supervisor(s);
- An external PhD candidate advisor of another department of the Faculty should be available, upon request of a PhD candidate or another departmental PhD candidate advisor;
- It is also possible that a PhD candidate has a PhD candidate advisor outside the Faculty, e.g. within a national graduate school or (inter)national network;
- A list of PhD candidate advisors will be published at "[Beta promovoren](#)", and updated by the Beta policy team;
- The yearly reporting of PhD candidate advisors will be coordinated by the Beta policy team.
- Workload estimated to be ~2800 hours in total per year for the Faculty of Science. With two PhD candidate advisors/department, this accounts to ~3 hours/week/PhD candidate advisor.

Appendix 1: Format yearly report PhD candidate advisor

1. PhD candidate advisor

Name:

Email address:

Function:

Department:

2. PhD trajectory & wellbeing conversations

Indicate the number of conversations with PhD candidates in different phases of their PhD trajectory, with optional required follow-up, e.g. referral to appropriate help

| Phase PhD trajectory | Number conversations with PhD candidates | Number of referrals |
|----------------------|--|---------------------|
| First year | | |
| Mid-term | | |
| Last year | | |

3. PhD candidate advisor activities other than conversations

Indicate the type of activities with the number of PhD candidates involved

| Type of activity | Number of involved PhD candidates |
|------------------|-----------------------------------|
| | |
| | |
| | |

4. Notable and other issues

Indicate issues that caught your attention and issues that are relevant to report otherwise.

Appendix 2: Background information

Table: Appointed PhD candidate advisors at the different departments of the faculty (response inventory of 19-10-2022)

| Department | Name PhD candidate advisor | Name PhD coordinator |
|---|---|-------------------------------------|
| A-Life | Just established as new department. | Jurgen Haanstra |
| Athena | Various tasks PhD candidate advisor already distributed among different Athena employees | Barbara Regeer |
| Chemistry & Pharmaceutical Sciences | Jacky Vernimmen and Yvette Schipper will soon select a PhD candidate advisor. | Daan Geerke |
| Computer Science | Split the role in two. Academic integrity assigned to two full professors, and one study advisor as non-teaching staff who support in other issues. | Fabio Massacci |
| Earth Sciences | Not reported | Monica Sanchez Roman |
| Health Sciences | Not reported | Hanneke van Dongen |
| Institute for Environmental Studies (IVM) | Not yet established | Paolo Scussolini Ad van Dommelen |
| Mathematics | Not yet established | Christian Bick |
| Neurosciences (CNCR) | Renée Lustenhouwer (in Feb 2023: Kim Hubregtse) | Matthijs Verhage |
| Physics & Astronomy | Not yet established | Rick Bethlem |

References and Background:

1. Introduction and VU-wide guidelines.

Starting January 1, 2023, every faculty should have one or more PhD candidate advisors in place, and most faculties have one: <https://vu.nl/en/research/more-about/help-support-and-advice-for-phd-candidates>.

The VU has established guidelines for the profile and tasks of the PhD candidate advisor: <https://tinyurl.com/vu-phd-candidate-advisor>. According to these guidelines, the PhD candidate advisor should act as a low-threshold contact person for PhD candidates, to prevent (escalation of) problems by early signaling. He/she is available to PhD candidates to exchange views on the track and daily problems, and to act as a sounding board. In doing so, the PhD candidate advisor also pays attention to the mental well-being of PhD candidates and monitors the progress of the PhD research.

Tasks in VU-wide guidelines:

- Be clearly present by 1) going into the departments, 2) participating in activities for PhD candidates, such as the introduction for PhD candidates and 3) organizing, together with the research integrity lecturers, an annual informal session for PhD candidates in which, among other things, research integrity dilemmas are discussed openly.
- Conducting discussions with PhD candidates in confidentiality, on issues that relate to the course of the PhD trajectory and problems related to the PhD study. Indication: three 0.5-hour conversations: at start, midterm and exit.
- Referral to other offices, if necessary.
- Signaling and, if deemed necessary, escalation within the Graduate School in response to problematic issues. The role of the PhD candidate advisor is limited to signaling and not monitoring.
- Feedback to the Faculty Board, for example through annual summary and anonymized reports.
- Participation in a central network with PhD candidate advisors, to:
 - share findings to monitor and develop VU-wide policy. The network can then provide feedback on this (anonymized) through the Network of Graduate Schools (NoGS) for advice to the College of Deans (CvD).
 - participate in joint meetings, to exchange experiences and learn from each other.

Profile in VU-wide guidelines:

- is independent with respect to the PhD candidates who approach him/her and is therefore not acting as a supervisor involved in the PhD track in question;
- is typically a UD or UHD, or has a similar function;
- can empathize with the position of PhD candidates;
- has an understanding of administrative sensitivities and preferably knowledge of relationships in the relevant department/faculty;
- has knowledge of the support offices for PhD candidates (confidential advisors, etc.).

2. Current situation

The VU guideline provides faculties with tools for fulfilling the role of PhD candidate advisor. The interpretation of this role is up to the faculties themselves. The appointment and financing remain decentralized.

At the Faculty of Science, a number of departments has already appointed a PhD candidate advisor. A survey among the departments in October 2022 showed that the picture is very diverse regarding the introduction of the position of PhD candidate advisor. The PhD coordinators who responded to the survey questions (from 6 of the 10 departments) indicated the following: four departments did not have a PhD candidate advisor or a confidential advisor, of which one department did indicate that it was in the process of introducing a system that each PhD candidate would have regular discussions with a staff member who was not involved in the research, and that the secretaries and the PhD coordinator would be contact persons in case of problems.

In addition, two departments indicated that they did appoint a PhD candidate advisor or a confidential advisor. This was in one department the PhD coordinator and in the other the PhD coordinator and the department manager.

One of these two departments reported that the introduction of a "PhD discussion" gave a positive result. In this, mixed groups of 5-6 PhD candidates discussed their working conditions, workload etc. A senior PhD candidate led the discussion and after an hour the PhD advisor joined the discussion to hear conclusions and wishes for further processing.

3. Wishes PhD council

The PhD council submitted a proposal on the tasks and profile of the PhD candidate advisor on 9-11-22. Below are their main wishes:

Tasks:

- One-hour conversation every 1 to 2 years, preferably every year, with each PhD candidate about well-being and PhD trajectory
- Refer PhD candidate to appropriate help: HR, PhD psychologist, VU housing service etc.
- Annual reporting towards dean, PhD coordinators, department managers and PhD council
- Support PhD council in surveys among PhD candidates
- Proactive involvement in supporting PhD candidates (initiate yearly meetings, check back with the candidates if they are getting the help they need and create documentation/inventory of recurring problems to be addressed)
- Be available for meetings initiated by the PhD candidate when more support is needed, besides the annual meeting
- Assist in building alumni network per department
- Participate in a network of PhD candidate advisors to exchange experiences and advice

Profile:

Appoint PhD candidate advisor per department or shared by a number of departments, with scientific background and knowledge of emotional support or willing to receive training for this, and not a supervisor of a PhD candidate.

In order to prevent biased opinions and additional workload, the PhD candidate advisor must not be an existing academic staff member. Instead we suggest someone who has experience working as a Study Advisor.

Background in emotional support is mandatory; preferably also has a PhD.

The PhD council recommends appointing a new person for this at the departments and would like to be involved in the recruitment process.
