# PhD journey *in the Netherlands*

This guide provides an overview of key issues and topics relevant to prospective PhD candidates at all Dutch universities.
It outlines the expectations for PhD candidates, the structure of the PhD journey, and the associated rights and responsibilities.

## What you have to know



Types of candidates and their funding




The three phases



Supervision



Go/no-go decision



Facilities and services




Academic freedom and research integrity

## Preparing for your stay



Housing




Tax and social security

## Additional information



Social safety



PhD communities

Universities *of* *The* Netherlands

Candidates and their funding
Three phases
Supervision
Go/no-go decision
Facilities and services
Academic freedom
Housing
Tax and social security
Social safety
Communities

## Types of PhD candidates and their funding

Dutch universities categorise PhD candidates based on their funding sources, which contrasts with systems where all candidates are considered students. In the Netherlands, most PhD candidates are paid university employees. Others are not employed by the institution but conduct research under a 'hospitality agreement.' This group includes candidates with external funding (e.g. grants or scholarships) and those combining a PhD with other employment. Additionally, some candidates pursue their doctoral research independently, using their own time and resources.

All PhD candidates, regardless of their funding or employment status, contribute to university research. However, differences in contracts, benefits, rights, obligations and allowances may arise depending on funding sources and nationality. These variations can include aspects such as salary, healthcare benefits, sick-leave provisions, childcare support, pension plans, health insurance, tax obligations, teaching responsibilities, contract extensions, training options and tuition fee requirements.

PhD candidates may have opportunities to develop teaching skills during the programme, depending on their appointment type and university policies. Those with an employment contract typically dedicate a small portion of their time to teaching activities, while candidates without an employment contract are often not permitted to teach. Universities provide detailed information on these differences and guide PhD candidates accordingly.

### Employed PhD candidates

**Employed PhD candidate**: Temporarily employed by the university in a paid doctoral position.

**Employee obtaining a doctorate**: University employee enrolled in a doctoral programme with an agreement to conduct doctoral research.

### Non-employed PhD candidates

**Scholarship-funded PhD candidate**: Not employed by the university but receives a grant or scholarship from another organisation to conduct doctoral research.

**Externally funded PhD candidate**: Not employed by the university but supported with funding (excluding scholarships) and/or research time from an external entity (e.g. an employer).

**Self-funded PhD candidate**: Not employed by the university and receives no external funding or allocated time for the doctoral research.



Candidates and their funding
Three phases
Supervision
Go/no-go decision
Facilities and services
Academic freedom
Housing
Tax and social security
Social safety
Communities

## The three PhD phases

A PhD programme generally consists of three phases.

### Admission phase

this includes acceptance and registration, and typically lasts at least three months.

### Research phase

this is the core of the trajectory, during which the PhD candidate conducts the research and writes the dissertation. At the beginning, most candidates prepare a training and supervision plan. Around the end of the first year, a 'go/no-go' decision is made (see Go/No-go section for details). The dissertation, approved at the end of this phase, may consist of a series of (published) articles, a design project or a monograph.

### Graduation phase

this involves the appointment of a PhD committee and concludes with a public oral defence of the dissertation, which serves as a formal evaluation to qualify for the degree.

## Supervision

PhD candidates work closely with their supervisors while maintaining considerable independence in designing and conducting their research. In the Netherlands, the 'four-eyes principle' ensures that each PhD candidate is guided by at least two supervisors. One must hold the **ius promovendi**—the legal authority to confer the doctoral title upon successful completion and defence of the dissertation. The supervisory team may also include co-supervisors, daily supervisors and external advisers. The frequency of meetings with team members varies depending on their roles and the agreements made with the candidate.



## Go/no-go decision

Roughly one year into the programme, candidates undergo a go/no-go evaluation to assess whether their research meets required standards and whether they are likely to complete their research within the remaining timeframe. For part-time PhD candidates, this evaluation may take place later.

The criteria for successfully passing the go/no-go procedure vary across universities, but typically include presenting a well-developed research plan that outlines the main research questions, theoretical framework, methodology, research design and literature review, along with a realistic work schedule for completing the PhD. The supervisors must agree collectively on whether the candidate may proceed. In some universities/faculties a third, external, reviewer may be appointed to evaluate the documentation.

A go decision allows the PhD trajectory to continue, resulting in an extension of the employment contract or guest appointment and residence permit (visa). A no-go decision leads to the termination of the PhD trajectory, including any associated employment contract, guest appointment and residence permit.



Candidates and their funding
Three phases
Supervision
Go/no-go decision
Facilities and services
Academic freedom
Housing
Tax and social security
Social safety
Communities

## PhD facilities and services

PhD candidates employed at a university or UMC have full access to the institution's online and offline facilities and services.

PhD candidates not employed by the university or UMC may have limited access, depending on individual agreements. The facilities and services available to non-employed PhD candidate are determined in consultation with the institution, in line with the applicable legal and fiscal frameworks for candidates without formal employment. Any such arrangements should be outlined in the candidate's personal training and supervision plan (or similar document).



## Academic freedom and research integrity

PhD candidates conducting research in the Netherlands are expected to uphold the five principles of **honesty**, **scrupulousness**, **transparency**, **independence** and **responsibility**, which underpin the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity. The candidate will be informed about these principles by their supervisor and graduate school. Additionally, the candidate will be required to complete a course on research integrity.

Ever since the founding of its first universities, Dutch academia has been characterised by a high degree of academic freedom, defined as 'the principle that staff of academic institutions are free to perform their scientific research, disclose their findings and teach' (KNAW). Researchers have the freedom to choose their research topics, questions and methods, access information sources, publish and share findings, collaborate with academic partners and design academic education. Furthermore, universities actively promote a diversity of opinions and encourage open debate and discussion. However, there are clear limitations to academic freedom (and freedom of speech) as outlined by Dutch law: inciting hatred or violence against individuals or specific groups is strictly prohibited, as is discrimination.

Research ethics and integrity are highly valued and actively promoted by universities in the Netherlands. Jørgen Carling of the Peace Research Institute Oslo defines ethics and integrity in science as follows:

- research ethics: doing research with responsibility, particularly towards participants, colleagues, employers, funders and society
- research integrity: doing research in ways that uphold confidence in the results, the researchers and the research community.

He explains that 'the two concepts are distinct, but virtually every aspect of research that affects its ethics also has consequences for integrity, and vice versa. For instance, errors that result from poor data management not only undermine confidence in the research (a breach of integrity) but also reflect a lack of responsibility towards participants and funders (a breach of ethics).'

Universities are also committed to 100% Open Science publication. Open Science represents a broad transformation in scientific research, higher education and social impact activities, ensuring that results are published in a FAIR (findable, accessible, interoperable, reusable) manner. This approach aims to make research findings and knowledge accessible as freely and as early as possible to both the scientific community and society.

Finally, the universities participate in the national Recognition & Rewards programme, which is designed to recognise and accommodate the diverse talents within Dutch academia. To achieve this, the universities have formulated five ambitions: diversifying and strengthening career paths; achieving balance among individuals; promoting Open Science; focusing on quality; and fostering academic leadership.



Candidates and their funding
Three phases
Supervision
Go/no-go decision
Facilities and services
Academic freedom
Housing
Tax and social security
Social safety
Communities

## Housing

The Netherlands is one of the most densely populated countries in the world, and there is a nationwide housing shortage, particularly for affordable accommodation in university cities. Unlike in some countries, Dutch universities are not permitted to own housing facilities. Most universities have agreements with local housing agencies to offer limited accommodation options for international PhD candidates. However, the majority of international PhD candidates secure housing through the private sector.
Living costs vary by region, with the western part of the country being more expensive. On average, housing costs range from €700 to €1500 per month. PhD candidates often need to allocate a significant portion of their budget to rent and other housing-related expenses.



## The Dutch tax and social security system

The Dutch tax system includes various types of taxes, the most relevant for PhD candidates being income tax, VAT (sales tax) and municipal taxes. PhD candidates employed by a university pay income tax, which includes mandatory contributions for social security benefits and a general tax on their wage. Candidates supported by grants or scholarships, provided they register their scholarship with the tax authorities, may also have tax obligations. This tax is automatically deducted from their gross salary. Note that some international PhD candidates may be eligible for the 30% ruling, meaning 30% of their gross salary is tax-free. This is expected to be reduced to 27% in 2027 or 2028.

Regardless of whether a PhD candidate is employed by a university or funded by a scholarship, they will need to pay VAT and municipal taxes. VAT (or *BTW* in Dutch) applies to goods and services, with rates ranging from 9% to 21%. The total price of goods in stores typically includes VAT. PhD candidates residing in the Netherlands also pay municipal taxes, which cover services such as waste collection, sewage and water. Vehicle owners must also pay road tax.

There are differences in eligibility for benefits from the Dutch social security system between PhD candidates employed by a university and those funded by scholarships who conduct research under a hospitality agreement. PhD candidates who are not employed by a university are not eligible for national benefits, such as the old-age pension (AOW), survivor benefits (AWW) or long-term care (Wlz), as they do not pay income tax to the Dutch state. If the salary is not paid by a university but the PhD candidate receives a scholarship from their home country, they will not be insured against illness, disability or unemployment in the Netherlands. It is advisable to check with the scholarship provider regarding coverage for long-term illness or other unforeseen circumstances. PhD candidates may be eligible for rent allowance, depending on their living arrangements.

In addition to mandatory Dutch health insurance, residents in the Netherlands are strongly recommended to obtain third-party liability insurance. This is standard practice and provides protection against high costs in the event of accidental injury or damage caused to others.



Candidates and their funding
Three phases
Supervision
Go/no-go decision
Facilities and services
Academic freedom
Housing
Tax and social security
Social safety
Communities

## Social safety at Dutch universities

A university must be a safe environment for students, employees, PhD candidates and visitors. Any form of undesirable behaviour, such as sexual harassment, intimidation, aggression, bullying or discrimination, is unacceptable. Dutch universities are committed to fostering a safe environment for everyone, continuously investing in raising awareness, providing information, and offering help and support.

The approach to combating undesirable behaviour is outlined in the Collective Labour Agreement for Dutch Universities (Article 1.12) and further detailed in each university's Code of Conduct on Undesirable Behaviour.

**Confidential counsellors**
If a PhD candidate encounters unwanted behaviour, they can consult an independent confidential counsellor. The counsellor provides immediate support and guides the individual through any subsequent resolution process. Additionally, confidential counsellors offer support and advice upon request, educate employees and students about undesirable behaviour, and provide both solicited and unsolicited advice to the university management on issues related to unwanted behaviour.

**Support**
PhD candidates who experience issues in their relationships with supervisors or colleagues, or who face personal challenges (e.g. burnout or mental health concerns), can receive support at Dutch universities. Some universities offer a dedicated PhD psychologist, while others provide assistance through the Occupational Health Services.

**Ombudsperson**
Since 2021, all Dutch Universities have an ombudsperson. The ombudsperson is an independent party tasked with fostering a safe work and study environment for the university community (including PhD candidates) and identifying and advising on broader trends related to social safety. While the ombudsperson is aware of individual cases, they do not handle issues that have already been addressed or those falling under the scope of complaint committees.



Candidates and their funding
Three phases
Supervision
Go/no-go decision
Facilities and services
Academic freedom
Housing
Tax and social security
Social safety
Communities

## PhD communities

**In general, all PhD candidates at universities, including UMCs, are part of a community such as a graduate school, research school or institute, where they are registered, receive training and take part in an academic network. This is not only beneficial for collaboration, exchange of ideas and networking, but also allows PhD candidates to grow within the culture of quality at the school and participate in its internal peer-review system. Training is provided to familiarise them with academic integrity, research data management, open science and privacy regulations. Embedded within a graduate school, PhD candidates can support and inspire one another, as well as hold each other accountable.**

**National research schools**
A national research school combines research with the education of researchers in a specific academic field. The school contributes to the national coordination of research programmes in particular disciplines and provides opportunities for professional skill development.

These schools offer various activities for PhD candidates, including courses, summer schools, conferences and exchange programmes. Most research schools are collaborations between participating universities. PhD candidates can apply for membership of a research school relevant to their discipline, often through their supervisor or institute. Candidates can ask their supervisor for more information on the appropriate research school.

**University PhD councils**
Every Dutch university and UMC has its own PhD representative body, network or council. These bodies act as sounding boards for organisational developments concerning PhD candidates at the university. For instance, they have access to the university's executive board and graduate school.

In addition to their formal representative role, these PhD councils serve an important social function by organising social and informative events and providing PhD candidates with access to various university and interuniversity networks. They also inform PhD candidates about life in the Netherlands, their rights, and developments that may impact their careers and development as young academics.

To become a member, PhD candidates can contact the PhD council at their university or UMC.

**Faculty PhD networks and associations**
Many faculties within universities have their own PhD network or association, which fosters interaction and communication among PhD candidates across different units and departments, while also keeping them informed of relevant developments within the faculty.

**National PhD network**
The PhD Candidates Network of the Netherlands (PNN) is the umbrella organisation for all local PhD councils at Dutch universities, UMCs and research centres.

PNN represents the interests of PhD candidates at the national level. It is currently in dialogue with various organisations, including the Universities of the Netherlands (UNL), the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), the Dutch Research Council (NWO), the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW), the General Education Union (AOb), the Netherlands Trade Union Confederation (FNV), PostdocNL, the Executive Boards of all Dutch universities, the Rectors' Conference, the National Students' Union (LSVb), and the Intercity Student Consultation (ISO). Additionally, PNN maintains contact with many other organisations connected to the academic landscape, such as political parties. PNN is also the initiator and a member of EURODOC, the European umbrella organisation for PhD candidates.

PNN's members are the PhD councils of Dutch universities, UMCs and research centres. Membership is not open to individual PhD candidates.



# PhD journey *in the Netherlands*

In line with the Bologna Agreement, all Dutch research universities and university medical centres (UMCs) offer three-year bachelor's programmes followed by a one- to three-year master's degrees. Admission to a PhD programme requires the successful completion of a master's degree. By law, only research universities are authorised to award PhDs, which are the focus of this introductory guide. While universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands offer professional doctorates involving applied research, these fall outside the scope of this document.

A PhD programme in the Netherlands is a third-cycle qualification as defined by the Bologna Process. While the duration varies by field, it typically takes four years, with some exceptions. The primary focus is on conducting independent research leading to a dissertation; however, the trajectory may also include doctoral education in transversal, disciplinary and research-related skills. This education supports the candidate's development as a well-rounded researcher capable of working in diverse research roles both within and beyond academia. Doctoral education is offered through research institutions, nationwide research schools and graduate schools (see PhD communities for more information).

The Dutch academic research environment emphasises collaboration and interdisciplinarity, and is characterised by a relatively flat hierarchical structure. PhD candidates are expected to manage their own research agendas, plan independently and actively seek guidance from their supervisors. While practices vary by discipline, online and flexible working arrangements are becoming increasingly common.

The Doctoral Regulations of the University of Groningen can be found here.