Guide for new PhD candidates of the Graduate School of Natural Sciences

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Introduction

This document is meant to help new PhD candidates in the Graduate School of Natural Sciences to start their research work with some knowledge of useful facts and with the right expectations. There are expectations from the division (or department) from the PhD candidates, and there are things a PhD candidate can expect from his/her supervisors (and the department). This guide is not meant to be a list of formal rights and duties, or anything of that sort, but to create awareness of relevant issues regarding your time as a PhD candidate.

Also, while some things, like the TSA form, may be common for all PhD candidates, there are also many differences depending on the institute/department that you work in. So keep in mind that certain things mentioned in this guide may not be relevant to you, while other information that is important to you may not be included in this guide. In any case you should always ask your supervisor and your colleagues about what is expected from you and what you can expect from the academic journey you have just began.

Supervision

Training and Supervision Agreement

Every PhD candidate should have a Training and Supervision Agreement (TSA). This is made at the start of your PhD, and will be written by the supervisor and/or promotor. The TSA contains simple facts like the starting date, the project name that funds the PhD position, the name of the PhD candidate, the name(s) of the supervisor, and the name of the promotor (which will be the same as the supervisor if your supervisor is full professor). It also contains a statement that a PhD candidate may be asked to spend up to 15% of his/her time to assist in teaching duties. The TSA contains the course planning to meet the requirements of the graduate school. Finally the TSA contains a description of the research to be performed, globally, during the coming four years. A detailed description can usually not be given. Since original research is the objective in a PhD project, it is not known beforehand how certain research questions should be answered, or how experiments can best be performed.

The Training and Supervision Agreement can be changed later. Many of the parts are not fixed. Any change should be discussed between PhD candidate, supervisor(s), and promotor. It is generally not possible to change anything related to the project or funding. Most PhD candidates are recruited on a project with a certain topic, and the supervisor (who is usually also project leader) is committed to having research within that topic performed: the funding of the PhD position is tied to the topic of the research.

Meetings with Supervisors

It is customary that a PhD candidate and supervisor(s) meet about once per week. Such a meeting can be used for several things:
Discussing Progress: the PhD candidate tells what was done or what was learned the past week
- Brainstorming: collaborative free thinking to acquire rough ideas
- Giving Feedback: the supervisor comments on the work done by a PhD candidate, for example a written text or the slides of a presentation
- Planning: agreeing on what the next actions are to proceed in the research, how to set up an experiment, how to analyze the outcome, to which conference/journal to submit a paper, etc.
- Any other information exchange (requests, suggestions, opinions, ...)

A meeting can take any time, from 15 minutes to more than 2 hours.

Usually, when you give your supervisor a written text, he/she will have time within a week to go over it and write down comments, which can be explained during a meeting. However, most supervisors have at least ten other duties and tasks that must be juggled and squeezed into the available time, and some of these tasks have deadlines. If your supervisor has teaching duties, he/she will be especially busy, and then it can take longer before you get feedback. Of course you can always ask when you can expect feedback.

Besides agreed meetings, a PhD candidate should always be able to walk into the office of his/her supervisor for any questions or advice.

Attitude
Within the School of Natural Sciences, we try to have a collaborative attitude towards each other, and follow rules and regulations, fill out forms when needed, and so on. You may be asked to provide help for one of the information days for new students, or the matching days, also for new students. It would be nice if you would agree to provide such help, unless you have an important deadline or are away for vacation or work.

Some of the tasks you will do, like writing papers to be submitted to a conference, have fixed deadlines, and working in evenings and on the weekend may then be necessary. To take a day or a week off, you should register this beforehand in the on-line system. You have many days of vacation that you are free to use any time, provided you don’t have other work obligations, like teaching. It is encouraged to use a significant number of holiday hours.

If you are ill, you are expected to report this on the first day you decide to stay home due to illness. It is best to both inform your supervisor and the secretariat by e-mail or phone. When you feel better, you should also report this immediately.

If for some reason the work relation between you and your supervisor has become problematic, make use of your institute’s tutorship system. In it is in everyone’s interest to start solving these problems as soon as possible.
Assessment and Development Interviews

Every employee of Utrecht University has an Assessment and Development interview (A&D interview, or B&O gesprek in Dutch), in principle once per year and in principle with his or her work leader. For PhD candidates the first interview will be after one and a half years, and is usually held with both the daily supervisor and the promotor (who usually is the work leader). Before the interview you will fill out a Self-Evaluation Form (Reflectieverslag), in which you write what has been accomplished in the past year, what you think about the work so far, and perhaps what in your opinion can be improved. This form is used during the interview as a basis. Besides looking back, the A&D interview is also about planning the next year. Your supervisor and you will agree together what will be done in the next year. This includes research work but also development, like taking a course on technical writing, and teaching duties.

An A&D interview also leads to a form that will be filled out by the work leader. The form contains the work agreements and an evaluation of the work over the past year. You will sign two times: once that you agree with the plans discussed and agreed upon for the next year, and once that you have seen the evaluation.

During the next A&D interviews, the plans made a year ago about the past year will be used in the evaluation. If the plans were not fully followed, the reasons for this will be examined. This does not mean that the evaluation will be bad. Maybe other, more interesting or important work was done instead, or other planned work took more time than predicted, or there were other previously unknown circumstances.

Research

A short introduction to academic research

Most research starts with an idea of a problem area in which to work. Then an extensive literature search is needed to find out what has already been done and what hasn’t. Sometimes, what hasn’t been done is listed as open problems or possibilities for further research at the end of papers (whether these open problems are always interesting is a different matter). It is very important to do an extensive, or rather, exhaustive search for related work. It has happened too often that results are rediscovered, and this is realized much too late (for example when a peer reviewer of your submission points out that this research has already been done before by Somebody et al. in paper [X]). After the literature search it is usually good to formalize the question that will be answered, and if possible, plan on how to answer it. If applicable, the method of evaluation of the expected results should be determined. This phase benefits from brainstorming. After that, it depends heavily on your field and the type of research - proofs, experiments, user studies - how to continue. At the end, research involves the communication of the obtained results via presentations and written papers. More about that later in this document.

Researchers have more types of work that are considered research. These include research proposal writing, journal editor work, and peer-reviewing (refereeing). As a PhD candidate you will probably not have to deal with proposal writing (or maybe at the end, when you may write a proposal for your own
postdoctoral research position), but you will be involved in **peer-reviewing**. Peer-reviewing is one way of judging how good new research is, and there are not many other way. It can only be peers who judge research, because there is nobody anymore at a “higher level” than you and your supervisor who can judge, like a teacher. Reviewing is a duty of all researchers, and PhD candidates are therefore expected to (learn to) participate. You will not be asked for reviewing in the first year, though, and you should only get papers to referee that are close enough to your expertise, so that you can judge them and also benefit from reading them. The first time you review, your supervisor will also try to be involved and give feedback on your review.

**Presenting and Publishing**

If all is well, the result of the main research activities is new knowledge. What remains is to communicate it. This is an art in itself. There are three main ways for researchers to present their work to other researchers:

- Oral presentation;
- Poster presentation;
- Written paper.

Oral and poster presentations are done at conferences (symposia), workshops, and colloquia.

**At conferences**, there is often a system in place for submissions of papers whose length is limited from six to twelve pages, which can then be accepted for presentation or not. Usually, acceptance for presentation implies acceptance of the written paper in the conference proceedings, which counts as a publication. When the program committee of a conference accepts a paper, it is understood that one of the authors will attend the conference and present the paper. Usually, this will be the PhD candidate. To present the paper, you will have to make travel arrangements. See the section on Conference Travel for more about this. Some conferences only have oral presentations, and some other conferences allow fewer pages for the written paper when it is accepted as a poster presentation. Some conferences also allow short papers to be submitted. Some conferences have different classes of paper (research paper, industry paper, demo paper, survey paper). In short, conferences have different customs and rules. They also have different qualities. Your supervisor knows the relative standings of different conferences and the topics they specialize on. This is important in deciding to which conference a paper can best be submitted. For example, it is not a good idea to submit a paper to a conference in the USA with only limited reviewing and no official proceedings, because this does not lead to a real publication and the trip will cost a lot of money.

Many conferences as well as many journals, especially the good (prestigious) ones, have full reviewing and will accept only high-quality submissions. It is therefore essential to spend a lot of time on preparing the paper. The following guidelines must all be followed:

- Convincing motivation (why the research is important);
- Complete literature review (with all papers relevant to your work cited);
- Clear description of the method, proofs, experiments, data, results (whatever applies);
- Consistent and logical notation;
- Suitable, helpful, crisp illustrations;
- Correct English (do not make too long sentences; this is technical writing, not literature);
- Appropriate conclusions that are not too strong and not too weak;
- References list free of mistakes and omissions.

Not following one or more of these guidelines gives grounds for rejection. But also if all guidelines are followed, the submission may still be rejected. Conferences have only limited space in the program for presentations and a limited number of pages in the proceedings, so the program committee will simply take the top set of submissions. The same applies for scientific journals. A rejection does not mean that your paper was flawed in any way. Every researcher gets papers rejected every now and then, we just have to deal with it. Note that a so-called double submission of a paper to two conferences/journals simultaneously is not allowed; this is considered academic misconduct. A possible exception is when one of the conferences does not have proceedings. Some conferences also do not allow submission of a paper when an extended, complete version of that paper has already been submitted to a journal. Most conferences list their rules about allowed submissions.

Conferences have deadlines for submissions, and often you don’t have quite enough time to prepare your paper perfectly. Many researchers work in the evenings and on weekends close to important conference deadlines. Preparing a paper for submission to a journal is more relaxed. There is no deadline, and therefore there is no reason to submit a paper until you are completely satisfied with it.

While a conference paper is usually limited in length, a journal paper can have any length. In some areas it is common to first publish a result at a conference (in the proceedings), and then the whole, lengthy version of the same result, but with full descriptions, proofs, and experiments, in a journal. Many journals have the rule that the journal version should contain at least 30% new material with respect to the conference version. In other areas, including many of relevance to virtual worlds, conference proceedings are published as journal issues immediately. In this case there will not be two versions of the same paper. If there is more material to write about than what can be put in the proceedings, then you can make a technical report at your institute or place a more complete version on arXiv, and cite this version from the proceedings version.

A PhD candidate typically strives to do research leading to at least four different publications in scientific journals and conference proceedings. This is not a rule, and technically, one could obtain the PhD degree without any papers. (The only things really needed are a thesis, a promotor, approval by the assessment committee, and a successful defense.) However, the thesis would mostly still have to contain text that is the equivalent of four significant publications to be approved by the supervisor and assessment committee. It is important for several reasons to publish research results during the PhD time, one of which is the future career. In principle, wherever the research is ready, it is the right time to
write a document that can be submitted as a paper to a conference or journal. It will probably later become a chapter in the thesis.

Papers are often co-authored by PhD candidate and supervisor, because often both are involved in the research. Nearly always, the PhD candidate does a lot more work (in terms of hours spent) than the supervisor; for one thing, a supervisor has a lot less time available for the research. In many research areas the PhD candidate will have his/her name listed first on the paper, and the supervisor last. In other research areas, the authors are listed alphabetically regardless of relative contributions to the work.

In case you think that your supervisor was hardly involved in the research at all and you think you should be the only author of a resulting paper, then discuss this first with your supervisor. It is not a good idea to simply assume it, and write and submit the paper without having talked about it. Such situations have already led to a lot of problems between PhD candidates and supervisors in the past. It is also good to realize that supervisors often have spent a lot of time on the project before the PhD candidate ever started, by thinking of a promising area for research and the open problems that need to be solved, and by writing the research proposal and getting it funded. In all cases, a PhD candidate must discuss any plan to submit a paper with his/her supervisor, before submitting to a conference or journal. Furthermore, for any submission, all co-authors have to agree with the submission (which should be obvious).

If you want to do research completely by yourself, for example after three or four successful papers with your supervisor and/or others, then you can discuss this with your supervisor. He/she will give you more room and will try to be less involved. In such a case it is clear beforehand that you are planning to work towards a single-authored paper. You are still entitled to get feedback from your supervisor on the paper.

**Academic Integrity**

Not only bachelor students cheat to get higher exam scores, also professional academics may be involved in fraudulent activities. It is good to realize what is, and what is not allowed. Mostly this is a matter of common sense but, in case of doubt, always ask your supervisor whether something is proper or not. Some obvious things that a researcher should never do are:

- claiming techniques or results as your own while you know that someone else already published it before;
- using figures or tables from other papers without citing them;
- presenting a limited number of data that support your claims while completely omitting data that are against;
- claiming you have a proof or other results when you don’t;
- copying whole sentences or paragraphs from papers of others (sometimes you may quote a sentence or paragraph if you indicate this clearly and give the citation).
There is a big grey area where some things are allowed, but only if you are honest about it when reporting it in your paper. For example, consider the question whether one may manipulate input data to get better results. Surely it is allowed to find outliers and remove them before running a new reconstruction method, but you should write down in the paper that this is what was done, and what method was used to eliminate outliers. But obviously it is not allowed to remove 10% of the data at random, apply your method on each of the resulting data set, repeat this a thousand times, and select the one on which your method worked best when compared with competing methods.

Peer-reviewing is also a task where academic honesty must be considered. When judging a paper for a conference or journal, you must try to be objective and fair. Apply the usual academic standards, and state how interesting the results are (which is subjective but needed). You are never allowed to use the results that you learned through peer-reviewing until those results are accepted and published. The worst form of misconduct of this type is probably to recommend the paper to be rejected, while at the same time you write up and try to publish those results as your own.

In short, apply your common sense, be conscientious, and in case of doubt, ask your supervisor.

Conferences & Travel
When attending a conference, there a several things that have to be taken care of. First of all, you must ask permission for the trip. Then, the following things may be needed, depending on your institute:

- Find out the approximate cost of the whole trip (travel, accommodation, meals, drinks, registration fee, local transportation). Try to keep the costs low. Note that you are entitled to register as a student if available, even though formally you have an employment with the university.
- Fill out a Travel Request form, giving an upper bound on the costs you will make.
- Print the form, get it signed by your supervisor and if required send it your budget controller.
- If the budget controller does not object, register for the conference. Depending on the conference there might be a fee involved. Most conferences have a student registration fee that you should use. Many have an early registration fee as well, which saves more money. Wait with booking travel arrangements until you hear back from the conference organizers. Book a flight or train (economy class).
- Book accommodation (the conference organizers may have suggestions and maybe special rates, but also check a site like booking.com because they may have better options).
- Just before the trip, gather all important information including the program and precise location of the conference. Figure out before the trip how to get from the hotel to the conference venue (at home you are still sure to have internet). Don’t forget to bring a passport, credit card, prints of plane/train tickets, poster or laptop with presentation, adapters and extra memory sticks with your presentation or digital version of your poster.

During the conference, attend the talks and other activities, and spend time talking to people and socializing. Spend the coffee breaks, lunches and dinners to get to know more people, and learn about
the research they do and the environment in which they work. A conference should be interesting for more reasons than just the talks and the posters. Research papers often start during meetings with colleagues at conferences, after discussing some problem that someone is interested in.

If you are giving a talk yourself, make sure it (or your poster) was prepared well before leaving. It is a good idea to give a practice talk to your supervisor and others too. Make sure you have multiple copies of your presentation (laptop (+adapters!), memory sticks, dropbox, ...), in case something goes wrong. At the conference, figure out before your talk if the setup is adequate, and if possible place your presentation on the computer that is used during the sessions. If you have demos, use your own laptop with the power plugged in, as many laptops cannot deal with handling a projector and a video or demo at the same time without being plugged in.

Keep receipts of all expenses. When back, go to the Expense Portal and do the declaration of expenses online. Print the form based on the expenses you entered in the system, sign it, put it in an envelope, add the receipts, and send it to the address given on the printout. The exact system for declaring expenses may vary.

The costs for conference travel are paid by reserved money on your project. It is therefore important to keep expenses under control. If there is no more money available to travel, then you don’t travel and a coauthor will have to present the research. PhD candidates often share rooms in hotels, as this can save a few hundred Euros. Carefully checking flight options also helps to reduce costs, for example by not booking a direct flight, by using a budget airline, or by booking early enough.

**Practical matters**

**Important paperwork**

There is a form to register for the Graduate School of Natural Sciences. This form should be filled out by your supervisor and you together at the beginning of your PhD time (1). Another form to be completed immediately after starting is “form 1”, which is a request to be allowed to (eventually) defend at Utrecht University. (2) You will need to supply a copy of your master’s diploma (or equivalent) as well. Much later, forms 2, 3, and 4 will become relevant.

Also, you have to register to *Metis/hora est* (3), which is a university wide database for PhD candidates. It contains information submitted by both supervisors and PhD candidates and it needs to be completed in order to obtain your PhD degree. You will have to fill in a form about your PhD track within 3 months after starting your PhD accompanied by a copy of your diploma and your ID. After that, you won’t have to deal with *Metis/hora est* until the last year of your PhD.

**Courses**

Every PhD candidate of the Graduate School of Natural Sciences will need to get sufficient credits in the training program. These credits can be obtained from master courses, PhD courses from the research schools, participation in local colloquia, courses on presenting and writing, attendance of summer
schools, and presentations at conferences. For many PhD candidates, courses on technical writing are particularly useful. A total of 20 ECTS must be obtained during the PhD track. These courses are – if possible – paid from the project budget.

Often the available courses will not necessarily be closely related to your PhD research. It should be seen as a way to broaden your horizon and learn something else. Nearly everything you need for your specific PhD project should be learned by (supervised) self-study. An exception is if you need something like a basic course in statistics or optimization techniques to support your research (and somehow you never had one before).

**Facilities and Equipment**

The university has standard facilities like desks, computers, printers, software, and copiers. For your research you may need something that is not standardly available, like a certain mobile device, certain software or a more powerful computer or laptop. In such a case, just ask your supervisor whether there are alternatives or else, whether it can be bought. Facilities will be bought if they are needed for the research, but also if they make the research easier, or progress faster.

**General safety and labs**

In case of an emergency, it is possible that the building you are working in will be evacuated. Familiarize yourself with emergency protocols, such as alarm signals and emergency exits. In case of an emergency, always follow the instructions of qualified personnel. It is possible that fire drills will be held in your building, take these exercises seriously as they are designed to test organization in case something really happens.

If your PhD work involves working in a laboratory, make sure you are familiar with lab rules. Locate emergency equipment such as fire extinguishers and showers so that you don’t have to go look for them once you need them. If you are unsure about the safety of your experiments, please ask a more experienced PhD or post-doc or your supervisor. Apart from working safely yourself, also keep an eye on your coworkers and try to create an atmosphere in which you can correct each other in matters of safety.

**Teaching & Student supervision**

Depending on where your funding comes from, you may be involved in teaching duties for up to 15% of your time. These duties can be supervising lab sessions or tutorial sessions, where you have to help students with practical assignments or exercises to practice with the theory. You may also be involved in correcting exams or supervising exams. In rare cases, and only if you want to, you may teach a single class. In all cases, obtaining experience in teaching is useful, and it will look good on your CV if you did not just spend four years purely on research, but also were involved in other activities at your department. For any job like assistant professor, having teaching experience is a significant advantage.

PhD candidates will also be involved in the co-supervision of master thesis projects. This will only be done if the topic of the master thesis project is close enough to the research topic of the PhD candidate. The PhD candidate will never be formally responsible for the project supervision; this will always be a
faculty member. Through the co-supervision of a master student you may get assistance in your research work, because it is common to let master students do research projects that are related (closely related, or spin-offs) to research that is done already at the institute.

**Final remarks**

**A Typical First Year**

Depending on your background (your study, the courses you followed, and the topic of your master’s thesis), you will spend a significant part of the first year reading research papers on the topic of your project. Try not to waste time on mediocre papers; try to read the useful, interesting papers only. It is not easy to tell beforehand whether a paper will be useful. Recent papers in good venues and older, well-cited papers are often useful. When reading papers, do not only read the contents, also pay attention to how the paper is structured, what notation was chosen, how effective the illustrations are, and think for yourself what you think is good and not so good in the writing of others. This allows you to copy the good things and purposefully avoid the not so good things.

When reading, you will also learn what the most interesting conferences and journals are for you. Browse and see what other research is done and presented in these venues, even if it is not directly related to your own project. It will help you get a broad overview of a research area in which your own research project fits.

During the first year you will typically become more knowledgeable than your supervisor on the precise topic of your PhD research. This is normal, since you will have much more time to spend on the research project than your supervisor.

In your first year you should also do a course for your graduate school program, maybe even two. Check what courses the research schools ASCI, IPA and SIKS have to offer, because some of these courses are taught only once every two years. So if an interesting course is taught in the second month already, sign up and follow it immediately. Later in the first year you may want to follow a course on technical writing, but you could also do that in the first half of the second year.

In the second half of the first year you will typically start up a research project with your supervisor. Agree on a topic, read all the relevant papers, define the questions to be answered, and go for it. Another good option is to write a survey paper together with your supervisor; you have been reading all papers on a certain topic anyway.

**Opportunities after a PhD**

Many PhD candidates will become postdoctoral researcher (post-doc) after obtaining their PhD. This is the right thing to do if your ambition is to become a professor at a university, because you can use that year to work on your publication list, and get some more teaching experience too. Besides, it is a good opportunity to discover (yet) another country and experience its academic system.
However, not all PhDs will stay in academia as the amount of positions decreases as you progress in university. Therefore, it is best to start thinking about a career outside academia as well. Familiarize yourself with the industry where your research is relevant or applicable. Excursions to companies are organized frequently; try to go to at least a couple of these (although it’s not necessary to do that in the first half of your PhD).

And Further
There is a lot more to be written about a PhD track, like all aspects related to the thesis and defense, and job opportunities after obtaining a PhD. This becomes relevant only later in the PhD time, and you will learn about it in due course. For now, enjoy your time as a PhD candidate and make the most of it. Remember that this guide is meant to help new PhD candidates have the right expectations, and become aware of issues involved in being a PhD candidate at our School. It does not describe any formal rights or duties. The course of each PhD candidate is different and individually planned, so it may well be that your own time here deviates in certain aspects from what was described in this document. In case you think that this guide can be improved in any way, you can communicate your feedback by contacting us at gsns-pc@science.uu.nl.

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Important People and Websites
Besides your daily supervisor and promotor, the following people and groups are important to you:

**ICT Beta**
For problems with software and hardware; helpdesk: ict-servicedesk@uu.nl;

https://topdesk.ictsc.uu.nl/tas/public/index.jsp

**Human resources**
For matters concerning your employment, labor agreements, etc.: science.HR@uu.nl

**International Neighbour Group**
Social network of foreigners working at Utrecht University as regular staff or PhD candidates, which organizes tourist excursions and other social events: https://sites.google.com/site/ingutrecht/

**Intranet**
University-wide information and forms of all sorts: https://intranet.uu.nl/
Confidential
In case of any serious issues that you cannot solve with your supervisor or your institute’s tutorship system, Egbert Mulder is willing to act as the school’s confidential for PhD candidates (e.mulder@uu.nl)

Bibliography