

Dear colleague,

We would like to thank you for your willingness to act as a mentor for one of our PhD candidates of the Graduate School of Life Sciences. We would like to take this opportunity to inform you about your role as mentor. PhD supervision is a shared responsibility among the supervisory team (*promotoren* and *copromotoren*), PhD candidate, the institution and the institution's available services. Hence, your role as mentor is part of this broader perspective with different actors playing important but different and complementary roles in supporting PhD candidates. All the different actors as a whole need to foster a stimulating and safe environment that is beneficial to the development of the PhD candidate.

Your role is to provide independent advice to the PhD candidate and the supervisory team concerning the **progress** (rate, direction) of the PhD track. You do not necessarily have to advise on the content of the research but you can provide suggestions where appropriate. You support and guide the progress and balance between research, teaching (if applicable) and training. The candidate can be stimulated to critically look at and reflect upon their learning objectives and progress thereof. You will monitor the quality of supervision as well. Furthermore, you can advise the candidate regarding their choices in the context of their ambitions and future career.

A first informal meeting between you and the PhD candidate is after your assignment. Although the candidate has the responsibility to contact you, we would like to invite you to reach out to the candidate to initiate this meeting. After this first meeting, you will meet the candidate at least once a year when the *Annual PhD Progress Meeting* takes place (see also the document [Annual PhD Progress Report Instructions](#)). Different meeting formats are possible: the mentor meets the PhD before to prepare the progress meeting together; the mentor attends the progress meeting and speaks shortly to the PhD and supervisors separately (no report has to be made from these individual conversations and confidentiality should be maintained at all times). The format of the meeting is slightly different between PhD programmes. Please contact the PhD programme coordinator for more information.

Although the content of the individual meeting with the PhD candidate depends on the candidate's needs, we advise to discuss several topics to help making the right choices regarding development. These are progress of both research and training (evaluation of last year and timeline for next year), personal and scientific development, quality of supervision, career plans and well-being. We compiled a list of example questions regarding these topics, see **attachment A**.

In addition to these yearly meetings, you will be available throughout the year for independent advice. In case of problems, the PhD candidate can decide to contact you to seek advice from beyond their immediate supervisory team. You should be able to handle confidential aspects of the topics discussed with the PhD candidate. However, we are aware that you are not trained to be a confidential advisor when PhD candidates encounter serious problems like inappropriate behaviour. Hence, it is important that you are aware of the services that are in place at Utrecht University (e.g., confidential PhD advisor, staff welfare and PhD psychologist) and redirect the candidate towards the right [institutional support structures](#).

We hope that this letter clearly describes your role as mentor at the Graduate School of Life Sciences. We have an [information document](#) for PhD candidates that describes your role illustrated with infographics. If more information is needed, please contact the [PhD programme coordinator](#) or [PhD team of the Graduate School of Life Sciences](#). We wish you a good time in your role as mentor.

Kind regards,

Prof.dr. Toine Egberts  
Director of Doctoral Education  
Utrecht University Graduate School of Life Sciences

## Attachment A: Meetings PhD candidate and mentor – Example questions

To guide the individual meeting between mentor(s) and PhD candidate, please find below example questions. This is a starting point for the conversation and lists important topics, depending on the stage of the PhD track. The candidate's needs will be leading when choosing topics to be discussed in more detail.

### Important general questions

- Are you satisfied with the progress of your PhD journey? Is the progress as you had expected?
- How would you assess the interaction and communication between you and your supervisory team?

### Overall progress and supervision

- What are your expectations from the PhD project and from your supervisory team?
- Are you satisfied with your assessment (e.g., UU: B&O, UMCU: P&G) and progress meeting with your supervisory team?
- What are your achievements of last year? Can you reflect on these?
- Is there a clear plan established between you and your (co-)supervisor(s) regarding research, teaching (if applicable) and training for the upcoming year? And for the full 4 years?
- Are there any foreseen difficulties or expected bottlenecks? How will you manage them?
- Is it clear to you what you can expect of each (co-)supervisor, and vice versa? Is the division of supervision tasks between the members of your supervisory team clear?
- Is the quality (length, frequency, content) of meetings between you and your (co-)supervisors adequate?
- Are the research facilities adequate?

### Research progress

- Is your (sub)project realistic and feasible within the timeframe planned?
- Do you think you can finish your PhD project within the four years?
- Is the available funding adequate to complete your PhD?
- Do you have a timeline for writing your thesis (thesis chapter ideas, chapter titles, start writing)?
- What results need to be obtained to finish the thesis? What do you need to achieve that?

### Followed training and personal and scientific development

- What are your personal strengths and weaknesses? (knowledge gaps, skills required, specific interests)
- How could you improve weaknesses by following training?
- What training have you followed last year/will you follow coming year? Have you updated the Individual Training Plan of the TSA?
- What conferences/meetings did/will you attend?
- Do your supervisors stimulate you to follow courses?

### Career

- What are your personal ambition and interests?
- Do you know what you would like to do after your PhD?
- Have you talked about your plans with your supervisors?
- What actions do you plan to take to get the job you want? Do you need to follow training?

### Mental health

- Would you like to share how your general well-being is?
- How is work-life balance?
- Is it clear who you could talk to if problems would arise?