A renewed PhD agenda for Utrecht University, 2026-2030

Doctoral Advisory Board (DAB), December 2025

1. Introduction

PhD candidates are the researchers of the future. They are an integral and important part of the academic community. After obtaining their PhD, they fill valuable positions in academia, knowledge institutes, the business community, government, and elsewhere. Each year, approximately 600 PhD degrees are awarded at Utrecht University. Together with UMCU, Utrecht University aims to be ambitious and innovative in its PhD policy. It therefore wants **to offer** all Utrecht PhD candidates an **inspiring, high-quality doctoral programme in a safe environment.** This doctoral programme applies to all Utrecht PhD candidates.

In this PhD agenda 2026-2030, we outline how we intend to achieve this objective. This agenda is embraced by all *Graduate Schools* and faculties of the UU and UMCU and will be implemented locally in a tailored manner. The *Graduate Schools* and faculties work closely together in the UU's *Doctoral Advisory Board*, which developed this PhD agenda. Each *Graduate School* also has its own quality assurance plan, which elaborates on School-specific plans. The following therefore concerns joint plans in broad terms.

During the planning period, the DAB will develop a more specific agenda each year and also report briefly on its activities each year.

2. The *Doctoral Advisory Board* (DAB) and the PhD trajectory

The *Doctoral Advisory Board* (DAB) (referred to as *the Graduate Committee* until 2024) consists of those responsible for quality assurance of doctoral programs within the *Graduate Schools* of Utrecht University. Some *Graduate Schools* are a direct responsibility of the vice dean of the faculty; in that case, the vice dean is also the director of the *Graduate School*. In other cases, *Graduate Schools* have their own director. In that case, the director consults with the vice dean of the faculty or faculties concerned.

The aim of the DAB is to strengthen the PhD phase at Utrecht University. To achieve this goal, DAB members exchange information and develop joint initiatives to further improve the PhD trajectory. They gather input, both at the central policy level of Utrecht University and within the *Graduate* Schools/faculties and PhD communities. Based on this input and after discussion, the DAB advises the Rector Magnificus and the Board for the Conferral of Doctoral Degrees (*College voor Promoties*, hereafter: CvP). Conversely, the Rector Magnificus or the CvP may ask the DAB for advice on specific PhD topics or issues. The DAB thus functions as an advisory committee with broad insight into what is going on in the PhD phase, among PhD candidates and their supervisors. The DAB also acts as a sounding board for PhD policy makers at UU and faculty level and as a contact person for PhD candidate representatives such as PROUT.

2.1 Composition

In November 2025, the DAB consists of the following members:

- Celia Berkers (Vice Dean of Research, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine);
- Sven Dupré (Vice Dean of Research, Faculty of *Humanities/Graduate School of Humanities*);
- Toine Egberts (Director of Doctoral Education, *Graduate School of Life Sciences*);
- Wolter Hassink (Vice Dean of Research, Faculty of Law, Economics, Governance, and *Organization/Graduate School of Law, Economics, and Governance*);
- Elly Hol (Vice Dean of Research, UMC Utrecht);
- Steven de Jong (Vice Dean of Research, Faculty of *Geosciences/Graduate School of Geosciences*);
- Bert Klein Gebbink (Vice Dean of Education, Faculty of Science);
- Irene Klugkist (Vice Dean, Faculty of Social *Sciences/Graduate School of Social and Behavioral Sciences*);
- Harold van Rijen (Director *Graduate School of Life Sciences*);
- Erik van Sebille (Director *Graduate School of Natural Sciences*)
- Ted Sanders (Vice-Rector for Research; **chair**).

This composition ensures that both the faculty and *Graduate School* representatives responsible for PhD policy are represented.

The DAB is supported by a policy officer for PhD policy from SO&O, Sanne Boomsma (as of 2026: Eveline Weenink), and a secretary, who is also secretary of one of the *Graduate Schools*: Gerjanne Heek.

2.2 Vision on the PhD trajectory

For a long time, a PhD program was seen exclusively as the first step in an academic career; a period in which PhD candidates conduct research, culminating in a thesis that is defended. Nowadays, we see the PhD phase primarily as the third and final phase of academic education, after the BA and MA. We also realize that the PhD trajectory not only prepares students for a possible career in academia, but also for a career (including as a researcher) in society outside the university. At Utrecht University, we therefore see the PhD trajectory as a development program for researchers who, supported by their supervisors, become proficient in designing, formulating, conducting, and reporting scientific research. At the end of the program, they are able to conduct academic research independently and responsibly.

We see the process as a journey (*PhD journey*), during which the PhD candidate grows as a researcher and as a person. This can be achieved by providing space for intrinsic motivation and the discovery of one's own talents, even if these lie in areas such as education or social impact. For these reasons, the *Room for Every PhD Candidate* vision has been developed. During the journey that PhD candidates undertake, their environment is crucially important. This starts with their immediate supervisory team (of at least twopersons), which must include a supervisor and/or daily supervisor. In addition, the research group, the research institute, the faculty, and the *Graduate School* play an important role.

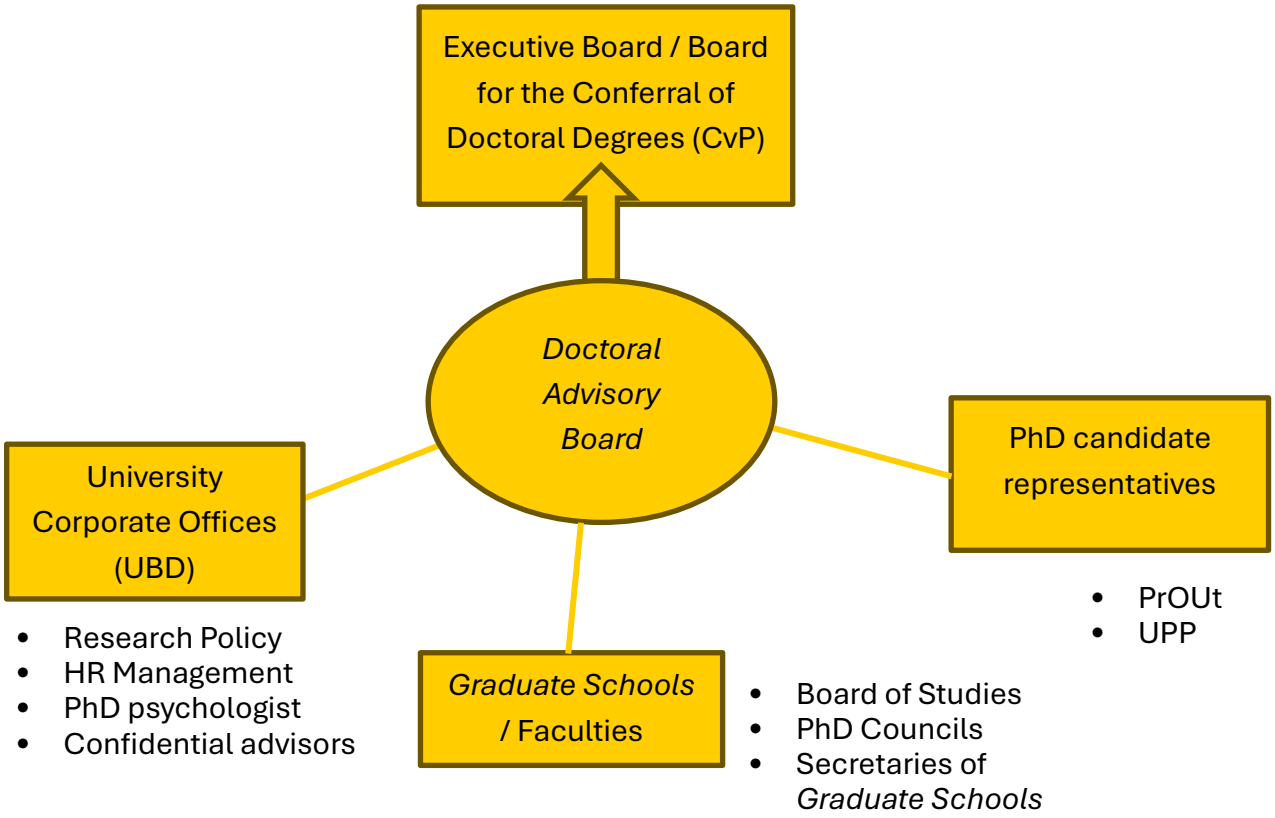
2.3 The DAB, the faculties, and the *Graduate Schools*

The doctoral regulations and the document "minimum requirements for the quality assurance system for doctoral programs" describe the formal rules and guidelines surrounding doctoral studies. These stipulate that the deans are primarily responsible for the quality of education and research within their faculty and the system that guarantees this. The quality assurance of doctoral research is supervised by the CvP. Because quality assurance thrives best in an environment close to the research, the training and supervision of doctoral candidates is entrusted to the Board of Studies of the *Graduate Schools*, under the supervision of the deans. The deans have delegated this task to the vice-deans and directors of *the Graduate Schools*. They chair these Boards.

Because the UU attaches great importance to a good, inspiring, and safe doctoral programme, the *Graduate Schools* and the faculties coordinate their policies in the *Doctoral Advisory Board* (DAB). The *Graduate Schools* and faculties share the same vision and are committed to the UU agreements, as laid down in the PhD regulations and related documents, such as the minimum requirements of the quality assurance system. They

also jointly monitor the implementation of the agreements and develop new policies where necessary. Where new policies exceed their mandate, they consult with deans/the CvP or the Executive Board. See Figure 1 for an overview of the interaction with stakeholders.

Figure 1. Interaction with various *stakeholders*



2.4 Working method

The DAB is a forum for sharing experiences about new initiatives and plans, as well as ongoing problems and challenges. It allows us to learn from each other, but also to jointly determine that we need to organize things differently.

The DAB has eyes and ears throughout the organization. All *Graduate Schools* discuss PhD matters in their Boards (of Studies / Research). PhD candidates are also represented there. DAB members also have contact with PhD candidates and their supervisors, and the chair and secretary have regular meetings twice a year with PhD representatives, as well as with colleagues in the support structures, such as university confidential advisors on undesirable behavior, university confidential advisors on scientific integrity, the ombudspersons, and the PhD psychologist.

We also draw inspiration and information from plans and experiences at leading universities elsewhere in Europe, such as within the LERU context, in which we are actively involved in the Doctoral Studies Policy Group, but also in national contacts, for example within UNL and UMCNL. In this way, we explicitly align ourselves with the Universities of the Netherlands (UNL) document 'A healthy practice in the doctoral system 2.0', to which we have also made an active contribution.

We are increasingly working in a data-driven manner. We are a learning organization in the sense of the PDCA cycle, in which not only new plans are made (Plan) and then implemented (Do), but also evaluated (Check) and adjusted or modified (Act). The latter two steps are based on appropriate qualitative and quantitative monitoring information. In the coming period, the DAB will also focus explicitly on the latter two steps, for example by including a concrete implementation plan in each proposal.

Based on this information, the DAB advises the Rector Magnificus and the CvP , both on request and on its own initiative.

2.5 Some previous results

Since 2018, proposals from the DAB (until 2024 *Graduate Committee*) have led to the following results, among others.

1. Agreements on supervision in the revision of the Minimum Requirements of the Quality Assurance System for PhD Programs (2020)
    - **Introduction of the four-eyes principle** in each supervision team: each candidate has two supervisors;
    - the presence of an **independent person** alongside the supervisory team and the doctoral candidate in **each annual review**, e.g., the research director or mentor.
2. Training of PhD candidates
    - Development of the research integrity course for PhD candidates, ***Responsible Conduct of Research*** **(RCR)**, which is compulsory for all Utrecht PhD candidates. The core of the course is the same throughout the UU, but different emphases are placed locally by each *Graduate School* (introduced in 2020).
    - ***Career services*** for PhD candidates, where they can explore their future career options, particularly outside academia (introduced in 2019);
    - **Teaching training** for PhD candidates who provide teaching (from 2020).

3. Training of supervisors
    - All new PhD supervisors will take a **course in 'Supervising PhD Research'** (from 2022).
4. Improving the care structure
    - Appointment of **PhD psychologist** (introduced in 2019).

3. PhD agenda 2026-2030

Building on this organization and on previous results, the DAB would like to continue working towards the realization of an **inspiring, high-quality doctoral programme in a safe environment** in the coming years with a renewed agenda**.**

3.1 An inspiring program

In an inspiring programme, PhD students are given the opportunity to develop into motivated and committed researchers who are encouraged in their professional and personal development, with a view to various career paths, including those outside academia. To this end, they are encouraged, among other things, to make their own choices.

3.1.1 Current projects

A prominent example of this is the *Room for Every PhD Candidate* project, which was developed in collaboration with the Open Science program and will launch a new vision for the development of PhD candidates in November 2025. This vision is based on the principle that PhD candidates should be encouraged to reflect on how they want to develop, thereby creating space for individual ambitions and talents. This gives PhD candidates the opportunity to develop not only in the field of research, but also in education, social impact, leadership, teamwork, or professional performance (such as patient care within the UMCU). This lays the foundation for more differentiation in career paths.

In the same spirit, we are currently working on PhD candidates' reflection on their own development path, making it easier for them to take responsibility for their own choices.

- Within the GSLS, we work with a PhD Competence Model in which PhD candidates reflect on the skills they want to develop. We are investigating the extent to which this is also appropriate and desirable elsewhere in the UU, or how it relates to ongoing pilot studies at the GSH and GSG, see the next point.
- We are conducting pilot studies at the GSH and GSG using the model *PhD candidates as the driver of their own development* (University of Wisconsin) in

various forms. After evaluation in 2027, we will develop a recommendation for implementation throughout the UU.

3.1.2 Plans still to be realized

In the coming planning period (2026-2030), we will be working on:

- The implementation of the vision *Room for Every PhD Candidate;*
- Guidance on the transition to the PhD labor market;
- Alumni policy;
- Supplementing PhD candidate training, for example in the area of leadership development;
- Diversity. Within the UU, systematic attention is paid to diversity in intake and selection within the BA and MA phases. Within the PhD phase, there is currently no explicit policy for this, other than within the regular HR recruitment policy, nor is there any policy on diversity and inclusion during the program. In the coming period, we will explore possible areas for development in consultation with EDI;
- Career paths (within but especially outside academia).

3.2 A high-quality program

A good doctoral programme requires good organization and adequate quality assurance for PhD candidates and their supervisors within concrete policy agreements. Below, we list some important characteristics of such a programme.

Organization

In a high-quality programme, the PhD process is well organized so that PhD candidates and their supervisors can function and collaborate optimally.

MyPhD is the formal registration system of the CvP, which can be used as a PhD candidate tracking system to monitor the progress of the PhD trajectory. The system is also a source system for reporting and monitoring.

In terms of policy, the DAB focuses on a learning PDCA cycle (see above): not only are new plans made (Plan) and then implemented (Do), but there is also evaluation (Check) and adjustment or modification of plans (Act). The latter two steps are based on appropriate qualitative and quantitative monitoring information.

Quality assurance for PhD candidates and their supervisors

For adequate quality assurance, it is important that clear agreements are made, adequate support is provided, and there is transparency in communication and expectations.

In consultation with the supervisory team, PhD candidates follow specific training courses relevant to their programme, which are recorded in the TSA. In addition, all Utrecht PhD candidates take the *Responsible Conduct of Research* course in a timely manner.

PhD candidates and their supervisors ensure that research and manuscripts are completed within the duration of the project. This means that the manuscript has been approved by the supervisors. From the outset, there is as much clarity as possible about the course of the process and the monitoring of progress: there is collaboration on the timely completion of the TSA, a go/no-go meeting within 12 months, followed by an annual progress meeting. A completion plan is drawn up for the final phase.

Effective and inspiring supervisors are crucial to a successful PhD programme. The TSA also sets out agreements on the frequency of supervision and who has which role within the supervision team. Supervisors are encouraged to take advantage of training opportunities. New supervisors are required to take the course "Supervising PhD Research." For more experienced PhD supervisors, there is the course "Supervising PhD Research – Next Level."

3.2.1 Current projects

We are already working on the following specific components:

Organization:

- The advice on the optimization of MyPhd will be delivered in early 2026. The project group and sounding board group consist of policy officers and support staff from the faculties and secretaries of the *Graduate Schools*. Specialists from SO&O and ITS are involved in assessing the policy and technical feasibility of the advice. The optimization fulfills many of the organization's wishes, the most important of which is that the middle section of MyPhd can also be used as a PhD candidate tracking system, so that PhD programs can be monitored more effectively and action can be taken if things threaten to go wrong, and so that better data can be extracted from it.
- Setup of an administrative system for the registration of PhD courses;
- Better embedding of the RCR course, which will be transferred to the Descartes Centre as of January 1, 2026.
- Organization: optimization of consultation between *Graduate Schools* (DAB and secretaries' consultation).

Quality assurance for PhD candidates and their supervisors:

- *Feedback to supervisors* is a pilot project launched in 2025 at the GSLS and GSNS to investigate how feedback can best be organized. Supervisors receive feedback on their PhD supervision from their PhD candidates, their colleagues, and their

managers. This enables them to develop further. The project group consists of HR experts, directors of GSLS and GSNS, the vice-rector for research, the PhD policy officer, and PhD candidates. The pilot is expected to run for two years and will then be evaluated. The DAB will then formulate recommendations for implementation at UU.

- Work is currently underway on a revision of the PhD regulations and other policy documents. Every two to three years, the PhD regulations are revised on the basis of new developments, such as the UNL document 'A healthy practice in the PhD system 2.0', and suggestions from within the organization.
- The evaluation and revision of the content of the RCR course.
- GenAI in research/PhD trajectory;
- Further reflection on the training course 'Supervising PhD candidates': for whom is this compulsory? Is it desirable for this to become a requirement for the SKOz (Senior Qualification Research)?
- Check and act: has TSA been implemented in all *Graduate Schools*?
- Check and act: is the go/no-go moment going well, in the presence of people other than the direct supervisors? Does this also apply to the annual progress interviews?

3.2.2 Plans still to be realized

In the 2026-2030 planning period, we will focus on:

Organization:

- Further implementation of a data-driven approach, including the development of quantitative and qualitative monitoring indicators;
- Better support for course organization and administration;

Quality assurance for PhD candidates and their supervisors:

- Position/policy for external PhD candidates and externally funded PhD candidates, with a focus on reporting progress meetings, among other things;
- Timely completion of PhDs, including via Completion Plan;
- Annual evaluation of GS PhD course offerings;
- Qualification and continuing education for supervisors (‘BKPhD’ and ‘SKPhD’);
- Universal assessment criteria for the manuscript ('rubric' and PhD thesis guidelines), where possible in relation to personal development, partly in relation to the educational model (graduate attributes). Linked to this: Cum Laude discussion: are there transparent criteria for the cum laude?
- Evaluation of existing practices in clear expectations at the start of the process: doctoral candidate/supervisor (*Golden Rules*, *Holistic doctoral supervision*).

3.3 In a safe environment

At UU, we want our staff to treat each other with respect and integrity in a pleasant and safe environment. In addition, we apply the principles of research integrity in the training of researchers. We recognize that the relationship between supervisors and PhD candidates is a vulnerable one:

- The role of supervisor is combined with that of examiner;
- It usually involves a period of four years or more of intensive contact and collaboration;
- The PhD candidate is dependent on the supervisor;
- It is often the case that the PhD candidate's research is part of a (larger) project led by their direct supervisor, which also creates a financial dependency.

In our view, the PhD trajectory therefore requires special attention to the welfare of PhD candidates, particularly in relation to their supervisors.

Many of the components of the quality assurance system that is now in place, such as the four-eyes principle and the annual reviews, are intended to ensure that any bottlenecks can be identified in a timely manner. Nevertheless, if PhD candidates encounter serious challenges and something unexpected goes wrong in the process, they can turn to the following bodies:

First line: within the research group or research institute, PhD candidates can turn to a person who is not directly involved and is independent, such as the research director, the mentor, or the PhD dean.

Second line: within the faculties and *Graduate Schools,* PhD candidates can contact the contact person for inappropiate behaviour or the contact person for research integrity, depending on the issue.

Third line: UU also offers psychological support in the form of the PhD psychologist. In addition, there are university confidential advisors for inappropiate behaviour, confidential advisors for research integrity, Ombudspersons, and the Committee for Interpersonale Integrity.

Naturally, the policy of the DAB, the faculties, and the *Graduate Schools* is primarily aimed at preventing PhD candidates from having to take these steps. Faculties and *Graduate Schools* jointly ensure that good information is provided about the various contact persons/bodies.

3.3.1 Current projects

Doctoral candidates receive specific attention within the university's HR approach to social safety.

We are currently examining how best to organize consultations with confidential advisors on inappropiate behaviour, confidential advisors on research integrity, and Ombudspersons, so that the DAB is well informed about the types of signals they receive and we can take these into account in our policy development.

The aforementioned *Feedback to Supervisors* project also aims to contribute to an open feedback culture, enabling early adjustments to be made in the event of obstacles to cooperation.

3.3.2 Plans still to be realized

In the 2026-2030 planning period, we will focus on:

- An integrated care structure that better meets needs;
- Defining the scope of work after the end of the contract (submitting manuscripts on time, but also clear arrangements regarding extensions (e.g., in the event of long-term illness);
- When creating a safe environment, we will explicitly take into account the position of both PhD candidates and their supervisors;
- We will examine whether and how exit evaluations of PhD candidates can become part of a feedback structure.