Room for every PhD candidate

A PhD trajectory is not only focused on conducting research, but also on the broad personal and professional development of the PhD candidate. By encouraging PhD candidates to reflect on how they want to develop themselves, room is created for their individual ambitions and talents. This makes it possible for PhD candidates to grow, in addition to doing research, in the areas of education, impact, leadership, teamwork and/or professional performance (such as patient care at University Medical Centres). It is not the intention that PhD candidates focus on all these areas, but rather that more room is created for a diversity of career paths in which they can make their own choices. This leads to motivated PhD candidates who consciously choose Utrecht University because of the room this university offers for broad personal and professional development.

By broadly reflecting on their own ambitions and talents during the PhD trajectory, PhD candidates will be well equipped to put them to good use in a variety of positions - both inside and outside of the university. Academic careers start by completing a PhD. Academics contribute to research and education which often has impact on society. They demonstrate leadership and work as part of a team. Academics contribute to solving societal issues and making the world a better place. Consequently, this also holds true for PhD candidates. The majority of PhD candidates eventually moves on to positions outside of academia. By facilitating broad personal and professional development and providing room for this in the PhD dissertation, the university enables various career perspectives to PhD candidates, making it an attractive employer. Moreover, creating room for broad development of PhD candidates allows them to effectively apply their knowledge and skills outside of academia, which increases the university's societal impact.

1. Room for diversification in PhD trajectories at UU

Utrecht University (UU) has adopted the national position paper on Recognition & Rewards 'Room for everyone's talent', which focuses on creating room for diversification and vitalisation of career paths for academics in order to recognise and reward the pluriformity of academic work. UU has translated the principles from the national position paper into a UU vision on Recognition & Rewards. In this vision, the TRIPLE model has been developed as a framework to put into practice the key principles in Recognition & Rewards. TRIPLE stands for: Team, Leadership, Impact, Professional performance and Education. UU employees do not have to excel in all aspects of TRIPLE, but they should be encouraged to differentiate and focus on specific areas. This also applies to PhD candidates. TRIPLE shouldn't be seen as a completion exercise, but as a frame for exploring opportunities for development that match the candidate's ambitions and talents.

The focus for PhD candidates is, and remains, on doing research ('R' in TRIPLE). Next to that, working in a team ('T' in TRIPLE) is a prerequisite for collaboration, which can take different shapes in different PhD trajectories. In addition, the other TRIPLE elements should be seen as key areas that allow for different variations of the PhD trajectory. Thus, in addition to conducting research, there must be room for PhD candidates to (further) develop in one or more of the other TRIPLE elements: Teamwork, Leadership, Impact, Professional performance and Education.

UU does not intend to attach fixed paths or profiles to each of the TRIPLE elements, such as an impact trajectory, as a fixed path impedes PhD candidates' free development and search for what suits their needs, talents and motivation. Instead, the TRIPLE elements function as areas on which emphasis can be placed during an individual PhD trajectory. As such, the TRIPLE elements should not be seen as boxes to be ticked, but as paths of opportunity that could be pursued.

Doing a PhD at UU is not only about doing research, but also about the personal and professional development of the PhD candidate.

2. Room for <u>personal and professional development</u> in a PhD trajectory

Doing a PhD at UU should not only be seen as an aptitude test in doing research independently, but also as a developmental trajectory in which PhD candidates reflect on who they want to be as an academic. It is therefore important that the supervisory team (supervisor and co-supervisor) engages in conversation with the PhD candidate from the start of the PhD trajectory to discuss their developmental wishes and to encourage the candidate to reflect on their own personal and professional development. This conversation already starts in the recruitment phase.

2.1 Mapping room in the recruitment phase

The room that is available for the broad development of PhD candidates, in addition to the process of conducting research and writing the dissertation, depends on a number of factors:

- *Employment contract*: the employment contract specifies several aspects, such as the length of the trajectory and the percentage of teaching time (which is for example higher in the case of a PhD candidate with a teaching position);
- *Funder (and its terms)*: the funder often specifies in the terms and conditions what the PhD candidate's funded time may be spent on;
- *Project plan*: project plans of larger research projects include planning, tasks (including for the PhD candidate), academic collaborators, stakeholder involvement and deliverables;
- *Supervisory team*: this involves the knowledge and tasks of the supervisor and the co-supervisor, and the culture in the research field (which may influence how a focus on specific TRIPLE areas is perceived);
- *Organisation*: guidelines and rules, such as the Doctoral Degree Regulations of UU (to which this vision remains committed and which will therefore not be adjusted) and the quality assurance guidelines of specific Graduate Schools, determine the room that is available in a PhD trajectory for personal and professional development.

It is important for the supervisory team to be transparent from the start about the room available to the PhD candidate and thus also about any present limitations. The supervisory team should start mapping the available room in the recruitment phase, when creating the vacancy for the PhD position and when having job interviews with candidates. In this way, a realistic view on the PhD research project can be presented and the right match between the PhD position and the candidate can be ensured. In addition, clear communication about the possibilities for broad personal and professional development and career perspectives in the recruitment phase contributes to clarity about mutual expectations between the supervisory team and the candidate.

If the available room does not match the developmental wishes of the PhD candidate, the supervisors can examine whether and how the available room can be adjusted. As such, the abovementioned factors can be seen as knobs to be turned. For example, a part-time position for teaching may be arranged, or it can be discussed with colleagues if specific tasks can be exchanged.

2.2 Exploring room during the PhD trajectory

As soon as the PhD trajectory starts, when the Training and Supervision Agreement (TSA) is written, the supervisory team should continue the conversation with the PhD candidate about their developmental wishes. The PhD candidate's developmental wishes, and plans to facilitate this development, can be incorporated into the TSA. The conversation about the development of the PhD

candidate does not stop here, but also takes place at other fixed moments throughout the PhD trajectory, for example during the go/no go moment, end of year two and end of year three (writing of the thesis). It can differ per faculty what these fixed moments are and how they are documented; in some faculties these are connected to Assessment & Development (A&D) forms or the Personal Development Plan. Room for reflection and discussion about developmental wishes should also take place in informal meetings with the supervisors. This facilitates a dynamic trajectory that can be adapted to a candidate's needs at a specific stage of the trajectory. Having regular conversations about developmental needs throughout the PhD trajectory also encourages PhD candidates to continuously reflect on their development as an academic, their ambitions and talents, and the career path that suits them.

Room for diversification can be created by making agreements about professional and personal development of the PhD candidate during fixed moments in the PhD trajectory.

Room for autonomy and development in the PhD trajectory are important, but the PhD candidate above all will need to continue to bear responsibility for meeting the PhD requirements (including PhD progress, go/no go and the timely completion of a dissertation). The supervisory team and the PhD candidate together ensure the right balance between freedom and responsibility. To this end, it is important to have an open and transparent conversation, based on mutual trust.

3. Room in the PhD dissertation

The focus of a PhD trajectory at UU is on conducting research, writing the dissertation and the public PhD defense. The dissertation is primarily a description of the research and its outcomes, but it also allows for output that is different from the traditional scholarly article.[1] There are examples of dissertations that include a code developed during the research project or that include a description of and reflection on societal engagement projects carried out during the PhD trajectory.[2] Furthermore, some dissertations within UU include (peer-reviewed) research cartoons.[3] By including other types of output in the dissertation, in addition to the research text, the PhD candidate and the research they have done is assessed more broadly. Impact and education activities related to the research carried out by the candidate during the PhD trajectory thus become more visible, which also shows the societal impact of the research.

In the case of research with societal impact, one can also use the room available to extend the PhD defense beyond the traditional defense in which the PhD candidate defends the dissertation before a dissertation committee. A layman's talk is becoming more common at Utrecht University. There are also examples of PhD candidates who have organized a societal defense in addition to the traditional defense, allowing groups of citizens that the research focuses on to also review and ask questions about the research.[4] Next to that, there have been PhD candidates who have presented the research in their dissertation as a dance.[5]

[1] UU Doctoral Degree Regulations.

[2] First example: Manon van Daal (2024), The Regenerating Body: An ethical analysis of personalized regenerative implants, chapter 5. Second example: Julia Ramona Spanier (2024), A rural(–urban) perspective: Agricultural grassroots initiatives and the making of post-capitalist futures, chapter 6.

[3] Carla Greubel (2024), Good Ageing: frictions in digital innovation initiatives for older people in Europe, chapter 5.

[4] Maarten Koreman (2024), Rural futures for young adults: Rural development and regeneration in the Netherlands.

[5] Kim Stienstra (2024), Educational quality and inequality. The interplay between schools, families, and genes.

4. The roles of the supervisory team, Graduate School and PhD candidate

4.1 Role of the supervisory team

The supervisory team plays an important role in creating room for the broad personal and professional development of PhD candidates. The term supervisory team was deliberately chosen in this vision because of the joint effort made by the supervisor(s) and co-supervisor(s).[6] Moreover, thinking in teams aligns with the core principles in UU's vision on Recognition & Rewards. The supervisory team bears joint responsibility for the supervision, support, development, coaching and motivation of the PhD candidate, supported by the Graduate School. Supervision here is more than guidance focused on the research topic, dissertation and public defense; supervision of PhD candidates within UU should also be focused on their professional and personal development.

The supervisory team bears joint responsibility for the supervision of the PhD candidate. Supervision is more than only guidance focused on the research topic and should also focus on the professional and personal development of the candidate.

The conversation between the supervisory team and the PhD candidate is key in exploring the possibilities for broad development and diversification in the PhD trajectory. It is pre-eminently the conversation between the supervisory team and the PhD candidate with which room can be offered to the candidate to reflect – in addition to substantive reflection on the research – on their broader development, and the possible introduction of focus areas in the PhD trajectory. In order to have this conversation properly, it is important to acknowledge the hierarchy between the supervisory team and the PhD candidate. Indeed, the supervision of a PhD candidate takes place in a hierarchical context, in which the PhD candidate is dependent on the supervisory team and often unconsciously and unintentionally ends up in a subordinate position. It should become common practice to openly discuss this relationship, which contributes to a good mutual working relationship in which the PhD candidate is more likely to make use of the available room to discuss developmental wishes. Several PhD's have emphasized this as an important point in the working relationship with their supervisors.[7]

Recommendations regarding supervisory teams:

- *Diverse team composition:* when possible, ensure a supervisory team with diversity in terms of (1) positions (full professor, assistant professor, associate professor), (2) gender and/or other diversity characteristics and (3) content expertise;
- *Changing team composition (not during, but across PhD trajectories):* to avoid that supervisory teams always consist of the same promotors and co-promotors, and to prevent unconscious unintended routines creeping into supervisory team behaviour, it may be good to regularly change the composition across PhD trajectories in order to learn from other fellow supervisors;
- *Division of tasks:* not everyone on the supervisory team has to do everything, but tasks can be divided according to expertise, experience and professional developmental needs;
- *Development of supervisory team members:* the principle of lifelong learning also applies to supervisory teams. UU's vision on Recognition & Rewards also applies to them. UU offers numerous development opportunities for supervisors, such as the obligatory course 'Supervising PhD Research' and the optional course 'Supervising PhD Research: next level'. By

[6] This aligns with article 5 in the UU Doctoral Degree Regulations, which states that "PhD candidates are always supervised by at least two persons: the supervisor, the second supervisor and/or co-supervisor".

[7] This was mentioned by several PhD candidates in focus groups for this vision, which took place on Jan. 30 and Feb. 3 2025.

also involving academics without Ius Promovendi as supervisors, they too get the chance to develop themselves.
- *Conversation guide for supervisory teams:* Graduate Schools can develop conversation guides for supervisory teams and PhD candidates, to ensure open conversations between them on opportunities for PhD's broad personal and professional development along the lines of Recognition & Rewards.

4.2 Role of the Graduate Schools

In order to indicate needs and wishes related to personal and professional development, it is important that the PhD candidate is familiar early on with the key principles of Recognition & Rewards, and with the TRIPLE model as a framework for putting into practice these principles. It is therefore important that not only supervisory teams discuss the Recognition & Rewards principles and the TRIPLE model with the PhD candidate, but also that the Graduate School ensures communication about this. Graduate Schools can do this by including Recognition & Rewards principles and TRIPLE in courses that they offer for PhD's, by sharing this during meetings for new PhD candidates (which some Graduate Schools organise) or by including this in templates like the Training and Supervision Agreement (TSA) or the Personal Development Plan. In this sense, the Graduate Schools play an essential role in the implementation of this vision.

Recommendations regarding Graduate Schools:

- *Examples*: Graduate Schools can share examples of how other PhD candidates have placed Recognition & Rewards principles and TRIPLE areas within their PhD trajectory;
- *PhD Journey*: Some Graduate Schools have a PhD Journey with predefined moments such as writing the TSA, Go/No Go moment and the completion plan. The associated tools for the PhD Journey could be used to refer to Recognition & Rewards and the TRIPLE model;
- *Competence Models*: Some Graduate Schools use competence models that help PhD candidates to reflect on the competences they would like to develop and evaluate their progress throughout their trajectories. This could facilitate PhD's broad development.
- *Adjusting templates*: Graduate Schools should ensure communication about Recognition & Rewards and TRIPLE by including this in templates like the TSA or the Personal Development Plan and ensure proper use of these templates. Also, these templates should include a section for describing the available room and the developmental wishes of the candidate.
- *Training and tools*: Graduate Schools should review and adjust their training offer and tools in alignment with this vision, to facilitate continuous reflection of PhD candidates on their development, ambitions and talents and the career path that suits them.

4.3 Role of the PhD candidate

Room for development and career perspective also requires the candidate themself to take responsibility. Whereas the supervisory team creates room for a conversation about the candidate's personal and professional development, and the Graduate School facilitates this with training and tools, it is up to the candidate themself to actively reflect on and share their needs and wishes regarding their development. This requires personal leadership. The UU principles of personal leadership indicate that a PhD candidate is willing to be self-reflective, cultivate mutual trust and responsibility, recognize employee diversity, and communicate clearly. Read more about personal leadership at UU on this webpage, under the heading 'You - personal leadership'.