

Admission for a PhD candidate with a regular, short or a long trajectory

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Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam aims to offer a PhD program that has a feasible timeline attached to it, so that the candidate can actually earn a PhD. A good candidate, with a good plan and appropriate execution, can write a dissertation that is approved by supervisors, and can meet the other requirements.

This document describes the main conditions in terms of employment status, financing and time availability that the faculty of Social Sciences (FSS) attaches to PhD candidates in different circumstances. Such clarification is needed to ensure that the minimal conditions necessary to successfully complete their PhD are indeed in place and to make clear the mutual expectations of candidates and faculty from the first moment a PhD project is considered.

The regular PhD project

A regular PhD project takes four years (4.0 fte, i.e., 48 months and assuming 6720 working hours) from start to finish. This project includes 30 EC training, 336 hours of teaching for a candidate on a PhD employment contract, and 5544 hours for the research. The intended duration of a project is calculated as the time between the start of the research and the intended approval by the supervisor.

There is one possible exception to the regular track that does not require permission from the GSSS, namely if the 6720 working hours are spread over a maximum of 72 consecutive months (six years). For a PhD candidate on a PhD employment contract, a maximum of 60 months of employment applies (of at least 0.8 fte – it is possible to deviate from this fte on the basis of a hardship clause).

According to the classification of the Universiteiten van Nederland (VSNU)², we have five types of PhD candidates:

- 1a. On a PhD employment contract: employed by Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam with UFO job profile code 'promovendus'.
- 1b. Employee pursuing a PhD: employed by Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam but in a position that is not designated as a PhD position. Usually, this involves a position that is dedicated to teaching as junior lecturer combined with PhD research.³

¹ This document replaces the document 'Minimum requirements for PhD trajectories' approved by the FSS Faculty Board, March 22, 2019 and incorporates GSSS policy in recent years, and specifies the VU regulations from December 8, 2021 (<https://vu.nl/nl/medewerker/start-dienstverband/richtlijn-aanstellingsduur-promovendi>).

² www.universiteitenvannederland.nl/files/documenten/Feiten_en_Cijfers/Typering_promovendi_2019.pdf. We do not have candidates in category 2a.

³ FSS does not facilitate a candidate pursuing a PhD on the basis of a research contract other than a PhD contract.

- 2b. PhD candidate with a scholarship or similar conditions: not employed by Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam but financed by a grant or employed elsewhere to work 4.0 fte on their PhD dissertation and who enjoy hospitality of one of the faculty's departments.
3. PhD candidate with substantial support (in money, paid working time or in facilities) from another organization such as someone's employer.
4. Self-financed PhD candidate who pursue their PhD besides a primary occupation outside of the research and without substantial support from an organization.⁴

A candidate in category 1a, 1b or 2b should have sufficient time to work on the project during the working week. A candidate in category 3 or 4 must be able to devote at least two full days per week (one working day and up to one on weekends) to the research (whether or not these days are funded or paid for by an outside employer) and must be able in due course to allocate the necessary additional time above the two-day minimum to complete the dissertation.

Deviation of the regular project

The assessment of a possible deviation of the regular 4.0 fte PhD project is case-based and flexible. However, several conditions must be met. Such a project is allowed as exception and needs approval from the GSSS. It is imperative that permission be obtained prior to a grant application, recruitment or an offer to a potential candidate.

In the interest of the candidate, we do not like to deviate from the scope and duration of a regular PhD project. A shorter project, i.e., with less than 4.0 fte, even if conducted by a very good candidate or a candidate with a lot of experience, runs a high risk of delay or may lead to avoiding any risk where science sometimes benefits from taking a calculated risk or dealing with uncertainty. Below we describe the procedure and rules regarding a project of less than 4.0 fte.

A longer project, i.e., with a duration of more than 72 months, requires a great deal of stamina and increases the risk that unexpected events in the candidate's or supervisors' lives will prevent the completion of the project or the continuation of supervision. Starting such a project is possible in exceptional circumstances. The supervisors, the head of department and the GSSS verify that the project is viable, does not become obsolete during the term, and can be completed with the supervisors appointed at the start.

Who can apply for a short trajectory?

A time plan shorter than 48 months is possible only when substantial work has already been conducted on the research project. This can include research that has been to a large extent conducted

- during a research master;
- during a previous PhD project at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam or at a different institution;
- during the same PhD project at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, that has been paused;

⁴ There are a few additional issues that require particular attention in the case of a VU employee pursuing a PhD in this category, especially to prevent confusion between their PhD trajectory and other tasks. Hence, it is essential that before entering the PhD program, there are precise agreements between the employee and the department where she or he is employed regarding the expectations relating to the completion of their dissertation. Importantly, it must be understood that participation in the PhD program does not affect any decisions on extension or renewal of employment contract. It is necessary to make arrangements for the availability of VU services needed to complete the PhD research should the (non-PhD) employment relationship end. Any agreement has to be recorded in writing, stored in the employee's personnel file, and attached to the candidate's registration to the GSSS (i.e. stored in Hora Finita).

- during a research appointment or another appointment with a substantial research component. All options require customized arrangements.

We distinguish three types of situations:

1. Side entry (in Dutch: 'zij-instroom'), i.e., the potential candidate has a demonstrable research record of direct relevance to the PhD project to allow the candidate to join the program at a more advanced stage. Thus, the potential candidate has already done work that is (potentially⁵) suitable for the PhD program. An example is that an article has already been published, and the intention is to include this article in the PhD thesis. Another example is that data specific to the project has already been collected and made suitable for analysis within the project.⁶ It may also be that a candidate has started the project at another university and wants to complete it at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. A candidate with relevant prior training or having previous experience (e.g., work experience) may qualify for a partial exemption from the training requirements.
A specific case of side entry is when the potential PhD candidate has completed an accredited Research Master's program (120 EC) prior to the PhD track, or the candidate has similar qualifications. In such a case at least 60 EC have been spent on research preparation that fits with the intended PhD project, or the candidate has achievements described above.
2. Restart of a project that started before April 1, 2015, and has been ended.
3. Restart of a project that started and was terminated after April 1, 2015, and for which a training of 30 EC was agreed upon at the start.

Requirements for a short trajectory in the admission process

Next to the regular admission requirements for a PhD candidate, we need additional information from a short-track PhD candidate:

- Describe accurately what has already been done, and what part of the intended PhD project can be replaced with it.
- For each already completed (in draft or final) chapter of the envisioned dissertation, you need to describe who did what ([Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam Doctorate Regulations](https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/more-about/docotorate-regulations) dated July 15, 2021, Article 16, <https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/more-about/docotorate-regulations>).
- If you have collected data, you need to hand in a data management plan where you explain how the data has been collected, and where the data have been stored and are accessible (<https://vu.nl/en/employee/social-sciences-getting-started/data-management-fss>).
The supervisors need to confirm in writing that the data management plan has sufficient quality, or other evidence should be provided. In case of doubt or unclarity, the supervisors are responsible to collect and document more information about the process of data collection and writing.
- If necessary, the supervisors can ask for additional chapters or elements to strengthen the introduction and/or discussion (what we call elsewhere the "synthesis"). In case of a short trajectory, the supervisors may expect more scientific depth as compared to regular trajectories. This is because the supervisors need to be able to oversee and judge the scientific quality and work of the PhD candidate of that part of the dissertation that has been written under their supervision, to compensate for their inability to fully assess work not done under their supervision.

⁵ Only in retrospect, during the review of the thesis and portfolio, can it be determined whether the work was useful.

⁶ The use of a pre-existing dataset that was not designed for the project (such as one that can be found in publications or obtained from a data repository) usually requires a great deal of work to make it suitable for the PhD project, and thus is not covered by this scheme.

- Whereas a regular PhD candidate needs to collect 30 EC in training, the GSSS can partially exempt a short-track candidate. If you want to apply for exemption, please submit a portfolio of your training until now. This also applies if you have completed a 120 EC master's in research. Applying for an exemption will be included in the admission procedure. In the portfolio, provide a list of all completed courses, workshops, and other training including a certificate of completion per course; a calculation of the EC's per course (see our website for the GSSS rules of EC calculation); and a list of other relevant knowledge and skills. Please pay particular attention to any courses in research ethics; if you have previously not had research ethics training, you will have to complete the compulsory GSSS course.
- If you join FSS from a PhD trajectory at a different university or faculty, please include in your application a description of the reason for changing institutions. Also, describe how your change has been discussed with your previous supervisors at the previous institutions. If present, please include relevant documents such as e-mail conversations with supervisors.

Specific requirements in case of situation 1, side entry

- This is a new project, thus a team of two supervisors is appointed.

Specific requirements in case of situation 2, restart with a first start before April 1, 2015

- Since April 1, 2015 a PhD requires 30 EC of training. In the event of a restart, the current rules will govern. Depending on the stage of the project at restart, more or less exemption from the training requirement may be given. In any case, i.e., even if the project is nearly complete, it is necessary that the restartee be adequately trained in research ethics. The Graduate School determines the requirements. For this we would like to see a portfolio of training followed (with EC's or a calculation thereof, and preferably with certificates), and the knowledge and skills of the PhD candidate.
- A new team of two supervisors is appointed, with the possibility of reappointing previously appointed supervisors.

Specific requirements in case of situation 3, restart with a first start after April 1, 2015

- The training plan is updated, which includes the training that has already been followed.
- Possibly the same supervisors can give guidance, for which then no further procedure is necessary. If necessary, the supervision team is reconstituted, in accordance with the current rules.

Dealing with insufficient funding for a 4.0 fte project by a candidate with a PhD employment contract

Some funders⁷ of research conducted by a PhD candidate with a PhD employment contract finance three years, rather than the usual four years. Standard is that the PhD candidate receives a PhD contract of 4.0 fte, based on the associated collective labor agreement conditions. At the start of the program, the department guarantees the funding for the entire PhD project.

When the PhD project is embedded in a larger project, and this project has sufficient funding to finance four years of tenure, then there is no problem. If the department exempts the PhD candidate from teaching and the potential PhD candidate agrees, a contract of 3.8 fte may be offered. The appointment can be further reduced to about 3.6 fte if it appears before the final selection of the candidate that exemption can be given for parts of the training program. Timely consultation with the GSSS program director is essential.

⁷ For example, projects in the Marie Curie program.

Further funds may be raised from external sources, but funding may also be obtained if the department can show that its long-term budget includes sufficient income to finance the entire program (this requires a Multiannual Research Program to be agreed with the Faculty). Any remaining shortfall should be funded from departmental resources; the head of department consults with project control and the FSS director of operations.

Even if Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam is not the employer and the employment contract is as a PhD candidate at another university or institute, a project plan of 4.0 fte is required.

Application of usual procedures

In all cases, applicable procedures must be followed, i.e., information must also be provided or updated on the

- data management plan;
- work plan;
- budget plan; and
- supervision plan.

These plans will be reviewed and approved by the Graduate School.

Specific arrangements on entry requirements, fees, and teaching plans may vary. These issues are settled as part of the admission process and are beyond the scope of this memo.

A Go / No Go assessment will be organized after 8/48 of the total intended duration of the project. The GSSS may decide that not all components will be included in the assessment. A Go / No Go assessment with a negative conclusion results in termination of the PhD project.

A PhD candidate on a PhD contract is employed by the university and their PhD trajectory is fully financed, either internally or externally. If the PhD candidate on a PhD contract works full-time, the initial employment contract period is twelve months, with the total scope of the appointment being 48 months. If the PhD candidate on a PhD contract works part-time, the initial employment contract period and the total scope of the appointment being extended accordingly (up to 15 months and a total of 60 months, respectively). A Go / No Go assessment with a negative conclusion results in discontinuation of employment.

Responsibility

At any time during the preparation or initiation of a PhD program, promoters are responsible for ensuring that internal procedures are properly followed. To this end, they must make timely arrangements with the Head of Department and the GSSS, and in the case of an employment contract, also with the Faculty Office of Research Support, Project Control, and Human Resource Management.

Further information

For further clarification and to start the process, please email as soon as possible to graduate.school.fsw@vu.nl. For further information, please visit <https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/more-about/the-graduate-school-of-social-sciences>.