

Problems at work? How do I handle it?

Procedure for PhD candidates and supervisors in case of an issue in a PhD trajectory

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For FSS PhD candidates and supervisors

For internal and external PhD candidates and for supervisors there is an extra procedure at FSS in addition to the VU Doctorate Regulations (see below). The purpose of the FSS procedure is to resolve any problems in the working relationship between the PhD candidate and supervisor¹ and vice versa in an easily accessible and satisfactory manner.

Problems are not always complaints

The FSS procedure does not necessarily refer to a complaint, because the complaints procedure is a formal VU procedure in which undesirable behavior is investigated by order of the Executive Board via an external complaints committee; this procedure is not anonymous. The term 'complaint' is often used incorrectly. For the purposes of this document, we use the term 'issue' (in Dutch: 'kwestie').

Issues with which you can appeal to the FSS procedure include a lack of good cooperation between supervisor and PhD candidate, disagreement about the cause of the project's delay, lack of insight into (sufficient) progress, disagreement about what will or will not be included in a dissertation, (co-)authorship, or (too) high workload due to teaching or other work-related issues. In fact, this procedure is open to all issues that may arise in the relationship between a supervisor and a PhD candidate and that can hamper progress other than what might be caused by the content of a project itself.

In addition, issues can be linked to, for example, age and gender discrimination and other undesirable behavior. This FSS procedure may not be appropriate for this type of problem, and another route may be more appropriate (see below).

Before starting the FSS procedure it is expected that you have tried to discuss the issue with the person or body concerned. Is there a situation in which this is not possible or not desirable (e.g., intimidation), one might skip this step.

Security

The FSS procedure provides safety for both the person in trouble and the person whose behavior, style, skills, knowledge or ability are being questioned. FSS will organize a proper hearing of the persons involved. A representative is expected to act in the interest of both parties, but in particular of the person being represented.

Particular attention is paid to the protection of the PhD candidate, because he or she is structurally in a weaker position than the supervisors. It is permitted for the PhD candidate to discuss an issue confidentially in the first instance in order to find out what is possible. There is no obligation to pursue the issue afterwards.

¹ Or supervisors

Status of an external PhD candidate

Within the framework of the FSS procedure for PhD candidates and supervisors, the position of an external PhD candidate is equal to that of a PhD candidate with an employment contract at VU. Where in this text colleague stands, it may also be the external PhD candidate.

Routes for PhD candidates and supervisors

There are various officials with whom you can discuss your problems in a safe way. They help you in a constructive and discrete way. Their methods differ.

1. A PhD candidate and a supervisor may raise an issue with the Director of the GSSS, the Head of Department, or both². The working method is described in detail in Appendix 1. In short, representatives (Director of the GSSS and Head of Department) have been appointed for both parties (PhD candidate and supervisor, respectively) who operate at the same level in the faculty. They shall endeavor to resolve the issue jointly and in consultation with the parties concerned. Both the GSSS Director and the Head of Department have decisive power (see below).
2. A PhD candidate can contact the FSS PhD Trustee for confidential matters, also if she or he is uncertain about the course of a conflict, the influence of private matters on work progress, or other things. If the Trustee is unavailable or has too little distance to the problematic work situation (e.g. works in the same department), or for any other reason, the FSS Confidential Counsellor for inappropriate conduct is equally available. A meeting with the PhD Trustee is confidential, and the PhD Trustee does not take the initiative to consult with other parties involved in order to resolve the issue. The PhD Trustee however, over time, might address structural issues arising from numerous meetings; she or he can report structural (faculty/work load related) problems directly to the faculty board (usually the Dean) without revealing the identity of those involved.
3. A PhD candidate and a supervisor can also contact the FSS Confidential Counsellor for academic integrity.

Address of the Director of the GSSS: director.gs.fsw@vu.nl

Address of the Head of Department: <https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/faculties/faculty-of-social-sciences/more-about/academic-departments-fsw>

Address of the PhD Trustee and Confidential Counsellors: <https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/faculties/faculty-of-social-sciences/more-about/the-graduate-school-of-social-sciences> → PhD Trustee and how to handle issues

When the issue is not resolved

If the issue is not resolved or cannot be resolved through the intervention of the Director of the GSSS, the Head of Department, the PhD Trustee, or the FSS confidential counsellor, or through the action of those involved, the issue may be referred to the Dean. The PhD candidate or supervisor who considers that the matter has not been sufficiently resolved shall inform the other parties concerned and write to the Dean about the for further treatment. The PhD candidate or the supervisor indicates what the issue is, and gives as complete an overview as possible of the actions that have taken place and what the results are, e.g. by sending attachments to the email. The Dean may use this written information to ask the other involved parties about their views. The Dean has decisive power (see below). The Dean may, on the basis of the written documents, take a decision, or both parties may, alone or together, hear and take a decision, or decide on other actions and measures.

² If one of them is involved in the issue as supervisor, you may contact the Vice Dean for a replacement.

Address of the Dean: <https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/faculties/faculty-of-social-sciences/more-about/faculty-board-fss>, email bestuurssecretariaat.fsw@vu.nl.

The PhD candidate or the supervisor may appeal the decision of the Dean to the Executive Board of Vrije Universiteit.

VU regulations: other routes, for everyone

When you experience a problem at work or have a complaint, first try to discuss it with the person or body concerned, if this is possible and desirable. Besides the FSS procedure outlined above you can also contact your manager, HR advisor or company doctor or company social worker. If you are unable to resolve the issue together, the ombudsman will provide staff or a confidential adviser with a safe place to discuss the issue or your complaint and together determine whether and what steps are necessary and what measures can be taken to resolve the issue.

The VU help matrix indicates for each type of problem who you can contact in the organization. Go to VUnet, English, 'Help, support and advice', <https://vu.nl/en/employee/help-support-and-advice> (in English) or visit <https://vu.nl/nl/medewerker/hulp-steun-en-advies> (in Dutch).

Binding of decisions and opinions

This FSS procedure has legal force to the extent that the Director of the GSSS, the Head of Department, and the Dean in their formal roles within the VU are responsible for taking decisions, issuing guidelines and issuing orders. The decisions therefore have legal force and cannot be ignored as such.

Appendix 1. Detailed procedure for dealing with the issue

Four actors in this procedure

Two representatives: The PhD candidate has to deal with many different people, including the supervisor, co-supervisor, the project leader, the manager, the Head of Department and the Director of the GSSS. Within the framework of this FSS procedure, the Director of the GSSS acts as representative for the PhD candidate. For the supervisor, the relevant Head of Department shall act as representative in the context of this procedure. In this way, both parties have a strong representative, both with formal authority.

Initiator: The supervisor or PhD candidate who experiences the problems and raises the issue with the representative is the initiator.

Involved party: The supervisor (or the supervisory team – we therefore use a plural form) or PhD candidate who is confronted with the issue by the initiator shall be referred to as the involved party.

Process steps

1. The PhD candidate or the supervisor (initiator) experiences a problem. If possible and desirable, she or he first enters into a conversation with the colleague (the person involved) with whom the problems have arisen.
2. If this has been tried and the problem has not yet been solved (well enough), or it has not been tried because it is impossible or not desirable, the initiator turns to the 'own' or to the other representative. The initiator and the representative(s) decide together how to proceed. Sometimes a good conversation (everyone feels heard and seen) or good advice is enough, often more is needed. For each issue, the best approach for the problem in question is looked at.
3. If more than a good conversation or advice is needed, the initiator's representative contacts the representative of the involved party. The representative agrees with the originator what she or he may or may not share with the involved party's representative. Often the representative of the involved party is not yet aware of the issue.
4. The representative of the involved party, sometimes together with the initiator's representative, discusses the information obtained with the involved party. This is not an easy conversation for the representative, especially if the person involved is not aware of the problem. The representative of the involved party may prepare the interview in advance with HR or a confidential adviser. Also for the person who is told that someone has problems with his or her style, behavior, expressions, et cetera, this is a difficult conversation. The representative has an important role in creating a sense of security.
5. The involved party may be given a few days to reflect on the situation. This depends on the seriousness of the issue and for the assessment of the representative.
6. After a few days there will be another discussion or, if no reflection period is required, we can immediately discuss which action or reaction most does justice to the issue. The following approach can be chosen here:
 - A conversation between the initiator and the involved party in the presence of the representatives.
 - A conversation with the initiator and both representatives, to share information and apply the adversarial approach.
 - A conversation with the involved party and both representatives, to share information.
 - All other actions which, according to the understanding of the actors, could lead to a positive result.

In practice, it may happen that the representative and the involved party require a few interviews in order to arrive at an approach. After all, the involved party may feel hurt by the behavior of the initiator.

7. Feedback is then given from the representative of the involved party to the representative of the initiator. The representative of the involved party tests how the reaction of the involved party will be received from the initiator according to the opinion of her or his representative. On the basis of the information obtained by representatives, they jointly analyze the issue and discuss what, in their view, might be the direction in which the solution might lie. They link this analysis to an advice for the initiator and the involved party in which the interests of both parties are taken into account and weighed up. Depending on the advice, the next steps are determined. The advantage of this approach is that representatives can facilitate or help to realize certain proposals in certain situations. Representatives also often have broad experience in what is customary in certain situations or have the authority to make agreements about them.
8. The representatives will in any case contact the party they represent and share with them (insofar as this does not violate any privacy rules) the information and insights and the advice given. Of course it is up to the initiator and the involved party whether they follow the advice in pure form or after consultation in an adapted form. The road to the implementation of the advice can be erratic and can include one of the following routes:
 - A conversation between the initiator and the involved party in the presence of the representatives.
 - A conversation with the initiator and both representatives.
 - A conversation with the involved party and both representatives.
 - All other conversation sequences that, according to the actors' understanding, can lead to a positive result.

The aim of the talks is to achieve an effective intervention. Possible interventions are, amongst others:

- The initiator accepts the involved party's approach;
- One or more interviews between the initiator and the involved party with (and later possibly without) representatives;
- Making adjustments to the collaborations;
- Turning on a mediator;
- A different division of tasks and/or responsibilities;
- Recommending a coaching program;
- Recommending a course;
- Agreements about what will or will not be included in a dissertation;
- Re-tuning the planning of the project;
- Reconfigure how to deal with (co-)authorships;
- Dismiss or add one or more (co-)supervisors, or reconfigure the supervisory team in other ways.