Golden Questions
for PhDs and Supervisors

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Developed by the PhD Council
of the Erasmus Graduate School
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About this document

This document is for both PhDs and supervisors.

In recent years, it has become more common for PhDs to take longer to complete their PhD than the time stated by their contract and to report a workload that is (too) high. Similarly, supervisors have seen a sharp increase in their daily workload, with increasing teaching and impact responsibilities. In a culture of high expectations and little time to meet them, it can be easy to rush the start of a PhD trajectory.

But starting a PhD is no small task, and setting up the right expectations early on can save all involved from stress and delays later in the project. The best way to clarify expectations is through initiating clear and open conversations between new PhDs and supervisors. To save you some time, this document aims to provide a starting point for these conversations, in the form of 'Golden Questions'.

There are two types of questions: those that facilitate development of the Training and Supervision Plan (TSP), and those that help clarify norms and expectations within the project team and within the academic field. Questions cover the topics of communication, progress monitoring, commitment, time management, professional conduct, future orientation and Erasmus rewards and recognitions.

Some questions will be more relevant for you than others, but all questions should feel approachable by both PhDs and supervisors.

There are more resources available for you.

Various resources are available for both PhDs and supervisors at the EUR, ranging from EUR-level resources developed by HR, to onboarding and course information from the EGSH, to faculty or team-level information about PhD requirements. Contact your PhD officer to find out what resources are available to you.

This document was co-constructed with both PhDs and supervisors.

The PhD Council of the EGSH created this document based on the Golden Rules for Supervision developed at Leiden University. We are proud to present this document as the product of over a year's worth of iterative co-creation processes with current and former PhD candidates, current PhD supervisors, PhD officers, HR staff and the EGSH board. If you have questions about (the creation of) this document, feel free to email the PhD Council at phdcouncil@egsh.eur.nl.

Communication

These questions are about communication and availability, helping to establish preferred practices during the PhD project. Effective communication is vital for a successful PhD trajectory, involving clear guidelines for meeting scheduling and feedback frequency.

Keep in mind that communication needs to change over time. Your communication agreements in year 1 will differ from year 4, so make sure to leave room in meetings for the evaluation and potential changing/updating of communication agreements.

TSP Discussion Points

☐ How often will we plan progress meetings, and who will be in attendance?

Examples: In the first year, supervisor meetings 1x per week, and promoter or supervisory team meetings 1x per month. From the second year, some face-to-face meetings can shift to email updates, or not all supervisory team members need to be present

☐ What format should our updates take? Will we have on-campus meetings, hybrid/online meetings, email updates, Teams messages, or other forms?

☐ What formal communication can we expect with other parties?

Example: annual P&D cycle, stakeholder or societal partner meetings, progress reports for funding bodies

General discussion points

? What kind of timeframe can be expected regarding written feedback on products submitted to the supervisory team?

? If there is a larger supervisory team or stakeholders, which person(s) should be contacted/should be available for which topics?

? How should we communicate about availability during holidays or busy periods due to e.g. teaching responsibilities?

Example: are there times we cannot/should not take holiday, out-of-office messages, sending an update before taking time off (both PhDs and supervisors), blocking time for preparing educational activities in Outlook so others can see your status as 'busy'

? How can we work together to create a safe environment and ensure we address conflicts if they arise?

Example: do we feel comfortable expressing disagreements especially in a hierarchical context, who has the final say on diverging opinions, when does criticism become too personal, where can we report unwanted behaviour or a harassment issue

Progress monitoring

These questions are about progress monitoring, including all checkpoints and milestones used to gauge PhD project progress.

TSP Discussion Points

☐ What are the graduation requirements from our faculty, from the project funder or from the EUR?

Examples: how many publications should be submitted/accepted before graduation?

☐ What are our expectations within the supervisory team regarding publications during this PhD project?

1. Do we work with papers submitted to journals or a monograph?
2. Should I be the first author of all papers in my manuscript?
3. Which contributions warrant co-authorship?
4. Is there an expectation of co-authoring/publishing with supervisors?

☐ What will our 9-month (for 1,0FTE, 12-month for 0,8FTE) Go/No Go meeting look like? How can we prepare?

☐ All PhDs in EGSH faculties are required to take two mandatory courses, *Professionalism and integrity in research* and *Open science and research transparency*. Are there other required courses or trainings I should consider, from the EGSH or from other institutions, or that are standard in our field?

Example: graduate courses offered by inter-university institutions, summer schools, faculty writing retreats

General discussion points

? What requirements are there for the PhD beyond written products? How are these additional requirements financed?

Examples: is there a minimum number of courses or conference contributions, are these courses and conference costs funded by e.g. the faculty or external funding, are there requirements for which courses or which conference contributions are expected (e.g. English writing course, presenting a poster at an international conference)

? Outside of publications, what criteria or metrics will we use to evaluate the progress of the PhD project?

Examples: conference contributions, successful data collection, progress indicators set by funding bodies or societal partners

? Are there specific benchmarks or checkpoints we can establish during the PhD project to ensure consistent progress tracking?

? Over half of PhDs in a 4-year contract take longer than the allocated 4 years to complete their trajectory. If the PhD trajectory takes longer than planned, what kind of support will the PhD receive?

Examples: finance, more intensive/longer term time commitment from supervisory team

Commitment

These questions are about commitment. PhD projects are a long, effortful commitment from both PhD candidates and supervisor(s). It can be difficult to maintain motivation and communicate clear expectations, consistently & continuously, during the trajectory.

Commitment can be improved by a sense of ownership and autonomy in the project. Knowing how to find and provide support - and that it's okay to ask for support! - can help maintain the project's success.

TSP Discussion Points

☐ Can we explore which parts of the PhD project are set, and which aspects have opportunities for the PhD or supervisor to provide new ideas and directions?

Examples: if the PhD is funded by an awarded grant proposal, how far can the PhD deviate from the project plan?

☐ The roles of the PhD and supervisor will change over time as the PhD takes on more responsibility for the project, and becomes more autonomous. How do we envision our roles evolving over time during this PhD project?

General discussion points

What factors do we anticipate will motivate us during this PhD project, and what factors will de-motivate us? How will we handle these?

Examples: perfectionism, rejection from journals, long wait times, high work pressure for both PhDs and supervisors, times of the year that are particularly busy e.g. thesis periods

What kinds of management styles work well for us? Do we prefer close support and communication, or more freedom and individual responsibility?

Drawing from our previous experiences (in academia or elsewhere), where should we anticipate potential stressors during the PhD trajectory?

What (social/emotional) resources are available to us within our faculty when we are facing challenges and setbacks?

Examples: (in)formal events for/by PhDs to share challenges, intervision meetings for staff to share teaching challenges, other support systems within our faculty or team

Aside from constructive feedback, it also helps to receive positive feedback when things go well. How and when will we celebrate (small) successes during the PhD?

Time Management

These questions are about what you can do if you need more time, or if you have more time and want to take on more responsibilities. PhD and supervisor time pressure fluctuates throughout the year and over the years. Effectively navigating these fluctuations is key.

TSP Discussion Points

☐ Teaching responsibilities are consistently cited as a time-consuming aspect of both PhD and supervisor workloads. Which teaching responsibilities do we anticipate having during the PhD project, and is there flexibility to drop or pick up these responsibilities in different years of the PhD project?

1. Is the PhD required to supervise student thesis projects?
2. When is the teaching schedule made available each year?
3. Where can the PhD learn how to supervise students or teach courses? (e.g. via RISBO)

☐ When in the PhD project do we anticipate will be the best time to plan in the required EC's in graduate courses?

Examples: writing courses early on, data analysis courses after data has been collected, do not plan courses during teaching periods

☐ Are there specific deadlines or timeframes in this project that we should keep in mind (even if they are beyond the scope of this PhD trajectory)?

Examples: external deadlines from funding bodies or other financial stakeholders, are there students, research assistants or PhDs whose research is contingent on this PhD project (e.g. thesis students)

General discussion points

What would we consider a realistic timeline for publishing a paper in our field, taking into account factors like rejections and reviewer suggestions?

If the PhD has particular skills that they would like to improve, such as public speaking, what opportunities are available for professional development?

Examples: Microlabs from RISBO, TOP training, the PhD's Personal Career Budget

How and when will we 'flag' that we think an aspect of the PhD project is going over-time?

What tools and strategies do we find help to maintain a healthy work-life balance?

If the PhD wants to take on more responsibilities during the PhD project, what opportunities are available to them within the faculty?

Example: helping the supervisor with a paper outside the PhD project, joining a faculty council or committee, planning a research visit

Professional Conduct

The following questions are about professional conduct, namely, what the expectations are about how PhDs and supervisors act in the workplace. PhD supervision is generally a one-on-one process, making it highly personalized.

There is no template for 'correct' PhD supervision. Expectations about conduct will depend on a variety of factors, including EUR norms, previous workplace and educational experiences, cultural heritage, and individual factors such as neurodiversity.

TSP Discussion Points

☐ What is the norm in our research domain relative to professional conduct, such as ethical considerations and open science?

☐ When we consider the different stakeholders involved in this PhD project, what are their expectations, and how do we integrate differing views/opinions from different parties?

Examples: co-supervisors from different universities, research participants, funding organizations, societal partners, and other financial stakeholders

☐ When giving/receiving feedback, what is the expectation regarding the *content* of feedback, including level of detail, rewriting and critiques?

General discussion points

? What are the norms for professional conduct in our workplace at EUR, compared to other workplace or educational experiences I/we have had?

Examples: Dutch cultural norms, working on campus vs. working from home, when we have (lunch) breaks, when is Dutch vs. English used, expectations regarding taking short breaks during the work day.

? Is there institutional support within our faculty to navigate issues within the supervision system? Where can this information be found?

Examples: each faculty/department has a PhD officer. Some faculties have informal committees, e.g. in the ISS there is a Research Degree Committee.

? What personal factors influence my expectations regarding professional conduct?

Examples: cultural heritage within/outside NL, norms at previous workplaces, neurodiversity, obligations outside work like family/children. Note: you are not obliged to share personal information with colleagues that you would prefer to keep private.

Beyond the TSP

These questions are about future orientation, to help initiate career discussions early on between PhDs and supervisors to ease stress at the end of the trajectory.

This includes exploring academic and non-academic options, tapping into existing networks, establishing new ones at events or conferences, and seeking guidance for valuable career opportunities after the PhD project is finished.

Future Orientation

How do we grow our professional networks in academia? Are there specific opportunities that can help to develop our networks in our field (e.g. specific conferences, research visits to specific institutes, publishing in specific journals or gaining funding opportunities)

Examples: What kind of guidance can the PhD expect from supervisors during conferences concerning networking? Are there events or networks for PhDs in our field?

Are there specific skills or competencies that we should prioritize, e.g. through including courses in the TSP, that are particularly useful for success in our field?

What thoughts and ideas do we have about the job market and potential career opportunities, both in academia and beyond?

These questions are tailored to Erasmus Rewards and Recognitions, which is part of the Erasmus vision for research. There may be flexibility in the PhD project for activities beyond publications that can be rewarded and recognized.

Erasmus Rewards and Recognitions

What specific reward and recognition mechanisms exist for PhD candidates in our department?

Examples: sharing successes through newsletters or during staff meetings

Is there room in the PhD project to accommodate activities in the domains of education, management, or impact?

Examples: joining a PhD council, completing a teaching qualification through RISBO, writing an article for a practical journal or magazine

In what ways can a portfolio be integrated into the final dissertation to showcase contributions beyond research output?