

## Summary Conference Healthy PhD Practices, 16 March 2022

On 16 March 2022, Erasmus (Graduate) School of Law, in consultation with Prof. Ivo Giesen (UU), Prof. Marijke Malsch (OU) and Prof. Jan Smits (UM), has organized the Healthy PhD Practices conference on its Woudestein campus in Rotterdam. The conference was attended by around 80 participants on campus and another 35 participants online. The audience consisted of a wide variety of stakeholders, ranging from PhD researchers to directors of graduate schools, vice-deans of research, deans and policy advisors. Most Dutch Law Schools, and even some foreign law schools, were represented at the conference.

The reason to organize this conference was twofold.

- First, in November 2018, the Universities of the Netherlands published the document 'healthy practices in the Dutch PhD system' underlining the importance of maintaining the high quality of PhD research in the Netherlands while safeguarding the wellbeing of PhD researchers and dealing with new challenges like the growing number of PhD researchers from abroad and the increasing importance of data management, open science and societal impact.
- Second, the national sector plan for the discipline of law identifies two general spearheads: 'Diversity/Inclusiveness' and 'Increase and strengthen the recruitment of young researchers'. Moreover, one of the KPI's in the sector plan is that in the 6-year period of the sector plan efforts should be made to reduce the number of months (i.e., from 68 to 56) that a PhD trajectory takes to completion.

After a welcoming speech by Professor Harriët Schelhaas, Dean of Erasmus School of Law, the keynote speech titled '*Doctoral thesis: test of competence or life's work?*' was delivered by Professor Marijke Malsch (Open University).

In two rounds of workshops further discussions took place about four specific topics: articles-based PhD dissertations, progress monitoring, mental wellbeing and the size and scope of PhD dissertations. The choice of these topics was based on the memo on lead times, April 2020, by a working group from the Board of Deans (RDR), next to an overview that has already been implemented within the Dutch Law Schools.

To conclude the conference, the closing panel, which consisted of PhD researchers, vice deans of research and directors of graduate schools and chaired by prof. Ivo Giesen, reflected on the main findings of the workshops. A broad consensus existed among both the panelists and the other participants that follow-up activities should be organized focused on the main findings and takeaways topics such as good supervision and wellbeing as well as on the main take-aways from the different workshops.

An overview of these take-aways in the various workshops is provided below.

### Workshop 1: articles-based PhD

- The decision to write an articles-based PhD dissertation needs to fit the candidate.
- Advantages can be strengthened, and disadvantages be reduced by making good arrangements at the start. Important topics should be discussed between the PhD researcher and supervisors from the start.

Some examples of (dis)advantages:

- the peer-review process of the journal can interfere with the assessment by supervisors and/or by the assessment committee;
- for articles to be developed, it is necessary to have a clearer and more comprehensive view on the existing literature at an early stage of the PhD; it may be necessary to "kill

- your darlings". Next to that, hard deadlines could help to structure the PhD trajectory. This helps to get a clear focus from the start;
- co-authored articles could lead to odd situations. Some guidelines on how to deal with the said situations could be helpful.
  - reaching the targeted audience is easier with articles than with a monography.

### **Workshop 2: Progress monitoring**

- Involving external members in the progress monitoring:
  - Involving external members can be helpful to create/expand a network (but this can also be created by attending other academic activities);
  - Involving external members can make the meetings on progress monitoring even more stressful for PhD candidates;
  - For supervisors, it can be difficult to give negative feedback/decide to give a 'no-go' decision. Hence, an external member could be helpful.
- Progress monitoring:
  - The go/no go meeting should not be scheduled too early. It could be possible to use the room in the CAO (contract of 18 months, go no go after 1 year, room for second chance).
  - When monitoring the progress, it is important to also take into consideration what the PhD researcher was expected to do next to his/her PhD research.
  - Following an educational programme could benefit the progress of the PhD trajectory.

### **Workshop 3: Mental wellbeing**

- The conversation about this topic should be normalized: PhD researchers are part of a competitive environment in which the common belief often is that they should handle problems on their own. There are also worries about stigma.
- Supervisors should be considered, to a certain extent, as role models. Hence, attention should be paid to what and how they communicate.
- Well-being is routed in relationships, autonomy and competence. Hence, community (building) is essential.
- Availability and accessibility of mental health support is important. This is because graduate schools and supervisors are not professionals. Nonetheless, it is important if they can recognize warning signs. Perhaps getting a training on that would be a good starting point.
- Distinguishing between 'normal' stress that comes from doing difficult work and mental health disorders is essential but sometimes difficult.
- A healthy work-life balance is essential.
- Some topics to further look into: what about people who do not seek help? What is the role of the employer (e.g., risk assessment; (mandatory) psychological meetings/courses/activities for all PhD researchers to be incorporated in the PhD trajectory)?

### **Workshop 4: Size and scope of the dissertation**

- A clearly focused research question is important in every type of PhD research, although it might be necessary to start broader and to focus at a later stage.
- Most law schools require an elaborated research proposal at the start, so preliminary (and voluntary) work is required before the PhD trajectory starts.
- The research question is the backbone of the research, but it should not obstruct the research (e.g., when it is too narrow).
- Not everything that has been researched must end up in the dissertation, but everything should be functional (i.e., contribute to the answering of the research question).
- The overall story must be told: contribution to the body of knowledge can be broader than just the results.
- Consider training PhD researcher on writing in a concise and focused way.

- Supervisors can help their PhD researchers. When they produce a text, the supervisors could ask how the text will contribute to the answering of the research question.
- It can be helpful if a supervisor gives an example of a good dissertation (which the PhD researcher should read).