

2014

ProVU Nota



Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

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ProVU: Vision, Mission and Aim

Vision

At the VU University, employees and students come together with a common goal: to provide the broader community with high-quality research and education. PhD candidates and postdocs are especially key to achieving this goal, as they contribute substantially to the research output, teach courses and supervise bachelor and master theses. ProVU believes in a university that demonstrates a desire to deliver independent and critical thinkers to society as these young researchers are the next generation of innovators, developers, philosophers and leaders within the academia and beyond.

Mission

ProVU is an independent, critical and young organization that represents and champions all PhD candidates and postdocs of the VU University and VU University Medical Center (VUmc). ProVU focuses especially on the role young academics play in the university and what ProVU can mean for these researchers. ProVU is convinced that enabling the success of these young researchers will benefit the whole university. ProVU provides a community of fellow PhD candidates and postdocs, and aims to build a social infrastructure for all researchers. ProVU hopes to create a stimulating environment for PhD candidates and postdocs during their time at the VU and VUmc.

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We aim to present a depiction of the current state of affairs and our suggestions with regard to the PhD policy at the VU University and VUmc. This document is a starting point for establishing benchmarks on policies affecting all PhD candidates and postdocs at the VU University and VUmc.

Micro: The PhD Candidate/postdoc

The Training and Guidance Plan, developed by both PhD candidate and his or her direct supervisor, should be the main starting point of every PhD project. It should list the expectations of both parties and provide a time line by which these expectations must be met within the preliminary budget. To achieve this, every PhD candidate should have insight in their budget and expenses. This Training and Guidance Plan should be discussed and, if necessary, revised every year at the annual review.

In order to manage, control and review all Training and Guidance Plans, ProVU advises the VU University and VUmc to resume all preparations regarding the PhD Tracking System. This system will monitor the status of the Training and Guidance Plans and will allow for strict time management and early discovery of problems. For example, the annual review might be able to reveal early problems, but only when it is consistently scheduled and adhered to. The tracking system can help employees focus on their research, because it takes care of much of the administration for them. In addition, this Tracking System may as well be used for creating a VU/VUmc-PhD alumni network. ProVU warns however, not to create an Orwellian state, in which employees are monitored too closely.

Temporary contracts have become increasingly common for many employees in recent years. This causes young researchers to be uncertain about their future. ProVU wants to bring more attention to this problem. A full time PhD candidate should have a PhD contract (instead of a series of positions as a (junior) researcher with the possibility of not getting a contract extension) according to the correct collective labor agreement. Furthermore, we believe that more tenure track positions (after obtaining the PhD degree) for young researches can provide a balance between the employee's need for security and the university's desire to reduce the number of permanent contracts. Furthermore, after their PhD, a lot of employees turn away from the academic world, not only because of a higher salary that can be acquired in other commercial organizations, but also due to the increasing negative spiral in the academic world. The declined funding by the government creates a situation in which people are confronted with an increase in competition, which will lead to researchers spending their time on writing grant proposals, instead of doing research.

Researchers should also have ample opportunity to improve beyond the scope of their research. A desire to take part in committees or platforms should be encouraged. ProVU would like to support these employees in organizing events, workshops or meetings for all the PhD candidates and postdocs who are working in graduate schools or research institutes.

Meso: The Graduate School/Research Institute

At the moment, not every faculty at the VU University is organized in a graduate school (the VUmc has research institutes). Graduate schools will clarify the research structure of the faculties and optimally facilitate the PhD candidates and postdocs in their research. It also allows current employees to advance in their careers and creates jobs for new employees. A graduate school can manage courses that may be of interest to these researchers, can monitor the progress of a PhD or postdoc project (whether or not using the PhD tracking system) and can appoint a PhD/postdoc coordinator. The graduate school (and the VUmc research institutes) may be the designated institute to monitor the quality of the PhD and postdoc projects and the quality of the supervision of these projects.

Finally, a graduate school will have the responsibility to organize a proper introduction for all new PhD candidates and postdocs and inform (inter)national PhD candidates and postdocs about the rules and regulations of the VU University and the graduate school. In addition, the graduate schools can also take care of PhD candidates who fall outside the boundaries of the current system, as some do not have a (full-time) contract at the VU University or VUmc.

Macro: The VU/VUmc

ProVU considers obtaining a PhD as a first step in the academic career and believes that this step must be accompanied by full-employment status, including pension rights and professional supervision, annual reviews and the right to additional training. ProVU believes that teaching experience is important to a PhD candidate's career, but that he/she must receive sufficient teaching training (for example the possibility to get a BKO: *Basis Kwalificatie Onderwijs*) and that the PhD candidate's research must always remain the university's first priority. It is vital to ProVU that the VU University ensures that PhD candidates are not negatively impacted by reorganizations in their faculties. ProVU will press for PhD candidates to maintain the status of employee, despite current experiments regarding the bursary system.

Every employee at the VU University and VUmc should have the chance to get involved in and be informed of the affairs of the VU and VUmc. Not only social and cultural events, but also VU-wide decision making is relevant for PhD candidates and postdocs. Therefore, a concise language policy is needed. ProVU recommends that the VU University should switch its default language from Dutch to English. All meetings and corresponding minutes should be in English. This is especially important if PhD candidates and postdocs are to be fully included and represented in the co-decision bodies of the university. In addition, all announcements regarding social and cultural events should be in English, as well as official VU ceremonies such as the Dies Natalis and the Opening of the Academic Year. VU webpages and other forms and information that are only in Dutch or provide only a short English summary should be updated.

The VU University Medical Center (VUmc) is a Dutch hospital. As most of the patients attending this hospital are Dutch, most researchers are required to speak this language. International researchers are mostly focused on research not involving direct patient contact. Despite this, the VUmc should make sure that these researchers are informed on internal affairs of interest to them.

Finally, numerous collaborations between the University of Amsterdam (UvA), Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (HvA) and VU are taking shape in the Amsterdam Academic Alliance (AAA), such as the beta cluster (former Amsterdam Faculty of Science (AFS)) and the merging of the VUmc and Academic Medical Centre (AMC). This will have a lot of consequences for PhD candidates and postdocs. ProVU wants to make sure that their projects will not be hindered. Furthermore, ProVU wants to make sure that these new collaborations will benefit PhD candidates and postdocs, for example by the collaborations resulting in more graduate courses.