

Golden Rules for PhD Supervision

	Supervisor	PhD Candidate
Be professional	<p>Be aware that all PhD candidates are different, with their own individual story, culture, competences and needs.</p> <p>Being a supervisor is a demanding job. There is no template for supervision. Keep an open mind and adapt to the PhD candidate.</p> <p>Co-supervision can be difficult. Ensure that you come to a joint view on the process so that the PhD candidate is not left in a quandary.</p>	<p>Be aware that all supervisors are unique human beings with their strengths and weaknesses.</p> <p>You will need to adjust to certain ways of behaving and, if something bothers you, address it.</p>
Be committed	<p>Be aware that doing a PhD is a lengthy process that requires long-term commitment from both sides.</p> <p>PhD candidates need to feel that you care about the project's progress and outcome. Even if the project is meant to develop the candidate's competences, you are also involved in this journey, and your input on the project, topic or execution is essential. Take responsibility for the project. Be up to date and collect material with which you can give your PhD candidate valuable scientific input.</p>	<p>Be aware that the PhD journey will be lengthy and not always easy, and that your initial motivation can be hard to maintain.</p> <p>If things are tough, don't despair. Carry on and talk to your colleagues or supervisors. It is a stage most PhD candidates go through.</p>
Be available	<p>Be aware that your regular availability is key to the success of the project.</p> <p>As part of your responsibility as a supervisor, you are to take initiative in planning regular supervision meetings. You are also expected to, in general, be sufficiently available to the PhD candidate in a way that is mutually beneficial, as well as professional. You should consider that, due to personal circumstances, individual PhD candidates may have different needs/ restrictions, e.g., in terms of meeting hours.</p>	<p>Be aware that the success of your project is a joint responsibility.</p> <p>Be aware that it is <u>your</u> PhD project and it is also your responsibility to arrange meetings with your supervisor.</p> <p>Be well prepared when meeting with your supervisor and ensure that your supervisor can be prepared, too.</p> <p>Make sure that you get the time you need from your supervisor while being aware of his/her time constraints.</p>
Be consistent and clear	<p>Be aware that the (perception of) research progress should be addressed. It is crucial to be open about your expectations from each other.</p> <p>Doing research is, by definition, charting unknown territory. Thus, it is unavoidable that the research evolves, including the supervisor's view of what the next step(s) should be. Be honest about this and show ownership of your changing views. Remember what you say and advise.</p>	<p>Be aware that being honest about your progress and your expectations is key to the success of your project. Use wisdom and tact to address possible issues.</p> <p>Be clear and honest about your research progress and struggles. For instance, prepare the meeting with your supervisor by sending him/her a list of discussion points beforehand. Use the meeting with your supervisor to clarify your research problems. Make notes of the discussion and what next steps to take.</p>
Be time aware	<p>Be aware that realistic planning is essential for a PhD candidate.</p> <p>Obviously, the plan as initially foreseen, will change during the course of the project. Be prepared for a change by thinking about a plan B when the original plan needs revision. Set short term goals and celebrate the successes with the PhD candidate. Make certain that the PhD candidate knows what, in terms of thesis content, is sufficient to graduate.</p>	<p>Be aware that planning is one of the harder things to do in research and that the original plan is almost certainly going to change.</p> <p>Keep track of the time you spend on a particular issue. On a regular basis, discuss this with your supervisor and what next steps to take. Discuss short term goals with your supervisor and celebrate your success together.</p>

<p>Be willing to receive feedback</p>	<p>Be aware that for any professional relationship to work, feedback must be a two-way exchange.</p> <p>You should expect feedback from the PhD candidate just as the latter expects it from you. Be open to the feedback you receive and take it seriously. If no feedback is given, ask for it. You are encouraged to do so a couple of times a year, but in any case, during the yearly progress interview with the PhD candidate.</p> <p>Remember that your reaction on the feedback will have an impact on the openness of your discussions with the PhD candidate.</p>	<p>Be aware that receiving feedback is very helpful for your progress.</p> <p>Keep in mind that feedback is meant to help you and is not targeted against you as a person. Feedback is needed to advance your project. If it is not forthcoming, ask for it and use the feedback to your best advantage. Don't be afraid to ask for feedback in an early stage, this prevents you and your supervisor from going in separate directions. If you experience the feedback as unhelpful, reflect on it for a while (with others) and discuss it with your supervisor in a professional and inoffensive way. When your supervisor has helped you or has been complimentary, show your appreciation.</p>
<p>Be willing to give feedback</p>	<p>Be aware that a PhD candidate needs regular feedback that must be professional, objective, constructive, and balanced.</p> <p>Feedback may have a large (emotional) impact on the PhD candidate, thus you should be cautious in choosing where and when to give feedback, especially when the feedback is person-oriented and would not benefit others.</p> <p>You should be aware of the cultural/ethnic/gender/etc. variation in the research group and should employ language that is inclusive and not hurtful to people with different backgrounds and traditions. Positive feedback is as important as critical comments.</p>	<p>Be aware that feedback on supervision can always be helpful.</p> <p>Supervising a PhD candidate is a hard job. You can help your supervisors by giving open feedback about their supervision, always with respect and consideration.</p>
<p>Be aware of stressors</p>	<p>Be aware that as a supervisor you are a role model for the PhD candidate, and should set a good example in terms of stress management.</p> <p>Be aware that your (potentially unhealthy) work attitudes are easily seen as a professional standard. Stimulate the PhD candidates to take breaks. Be aware that the PhD candidate's personal life story can affect their work.</p>	<p>Be aware that your life involves more than your work.</p> <p>Manage your stress level and respect your boundaries. Also talk to your colleagues and peers about their struggles with doing research, sharing the same experience helps to manage the difficulties of life as a PhD candidate.</p> <p>Maintain the communication with your supervisor and remember that your supervisor has followed the same path before you and can also help you to put things in perspective.</p>
<p>Be future-oriented</p>	<p>Be aware that a PhD student might need stimulation to think about his/her career after graduation.</p> <p>Many PhD candidates do not think much about their next career step before their last year, nor do they know much about what comes after the PhD, especially outside academia. Having no prospects for future career development triggers and increases stress. Thus, it is very important to timely discuss this point with your PhD candidate. Make your professional network available to your PhD candidates.</p>	<p>Be aware that you need to think about your career after graduation.</p> <p>There are very few jobs in academia. Take this into account. Most PhD candidates start thinking about their next career step during their 3rd or 4th year, which is late. Spend some dedicated time on this issue already in your 2nd year. Your supervisor, who is the person who knows you the best professionally, can advise you. The university is regularly organizing events that can provide you with more information.¹ Work on your network. Let the outside world know who you are. Don't underestimate the time this takes.</p>

¹ Such as the Leiden PhD Career Platform (<https://phdcareerplatform.universiteitleiden.nl/en/>).

An opportunity to improve PhD supervision

In 2018 Leiden University organized a survey of its personnel to investigate employee satisfaction on a broad range of topics. The PhD candidates were included in this survey but were also asked to fill in a separate questionnaire aimed at their specific position in the University. This “promovendimonitor” revealed that, overall, PhD candidates were quite satisfied. However, there is a substantial contingent who is deeply unhappy. Many issues are involved here, but the supervision they receive seems to be the biggest one.

It is important to realize that this unhappiness or dissatisfaction may well be a problem that existed already for many years. The 2018 survey made it become apparent by probing the PhD candidate’s experience more extensively.

Around the same time, the matter of a PhD candidate’s well-being was addressed by a number of widely read international journals such as *Nature* and *Science*.² In various columns in these journals, as well as in the CWTS Leiden research project, a rather bleak picture was painted of the life of a PhD candidate, focusing on stress, burn-out and psychological complaints. Such pictures were picked up by several national newspapers, such as *NRC Handelsblad* and *Trouw*, thereby greatly increasing its visibility.

The Board of the University has recognized the importance of this issue. Independent thereof, members of the board of the PhD associations (LEO and LAP), the PhD representative in the University Council and several people originally involved in setting up the “promovendimonitor” joined forces to address this point, based on their own experiences and wisdom.

Our project took off in September 2018, and over the following months, our ideas took shape, namely, to come to a set of “Golden Rules for PhD Supervision”. Our discussions showed that due to the absence of a clear job description, it is difficult for both parties, PhD candidates and supervisors alike, to know what is required of them and what can be expected from the other party. Explicit and official guidelines will bring transparency for both sides, thus making it easier for supervisors to focus on their responsibilities and encourage PhD candidates to take initiative and ask for needed support.

These policy proposals are balanced for supervisor and supervisee. Underlying this balancing is the thought that the supervisor and supervisee enter into a work relationship with each other, with the shared goal to have the PhD candidates receive their doctorate.

Our aim was to produce a concise document containing clear standards. Each of these standards are expanded into one or two sentences, adjusted to the positions as a supervisor or supervisee. And each of these is described further to make them applicable in practice.

This document is the result of extensive discussions amongst ourselves and with various stakeholders. We believe each and every standard is important. We do not touch on the issue of scientific integrity since we consider that fundamental to everyone’s actions. We hope that these standards become a tool for improving the supervision experience of PhD candidates at Leiden University. It is a “living” document and the tools it provides should be reviewed in due time.

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² See, for instance, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-00413-5?sap-outbound-id=142CE621DC24AD9C238EEB0C949B110BF567A47C>