

PNN position paper: The position of international scholarship PhD candidates in the Netherlands

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Context

Of the 37,100 PhD candidates in the Netherlands, only 51 percent are employed by a university or university medical centre (UMC). 4,200 candidates (11 percent) are registered as a bursary PhD candidate (also known as scholarship PhD candidate).¹ Bursary candidates mainly belong to two groups. The first group consists of PhD candidates partaking in the 'scholarship PhD experiment' at the University of Groningen. The scholarship PhD experiment in Groningen will end in 2024.² The second – more heterogeneous – group consists of PhD candidates that come from abroad and receive a grant that often comes from the government or an institution in their home country. In this position paper PNN will cover why this second group should be incorporated as employee PhD candidates.

The gross wage of a PhD candidate who is employed by a university or UMC currently lies between €2,500 and €3,500 per month³, excluding holiday pay and an annual bonus. Even though bursary PhD candidates do comparable work and are held to the same standards as employed candidates, the grants that they have to live off are often substantially lower than the salary of employed candidates. In many cases they do not even meet minimum wage requirements. The Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) gives out visas to come to the Netherlands as a researcher if the applicant can prove they earn at least 70 percent of minimum wage (or have sufficient savings available).⁴ In addition, bursary PhD candidates have fewer rights: they are not protected by Dutch labour law or a collective labour agreement, do not save for their pension and do not have a right to sick leave or pregnancy leave. They generally also do not fall under the Dutch national health care system and cannot apply for government allowances ('toeslagen'). There are plenty of stories of international bursary PhD candidates who severely struggle to get by and feel like they are treated as second-class citizens.^{5,6} Nevertheless, there is hardly any data available on this group.

Arguments in favour of this type of international bursary candidates also exist. First and foremost, such candidates are cheaper for the institution. Even though bursary

¹https://www.universiteitenvannederland.nl/nl_NL/Gezonde+praktijken+Promotiesysteem

²<https://ukrant.nl/minister-puts-definitive-end-to-scholarship-phd-experiment-the-ug-has-1500-of-those/?lang=en>

³ At time of writing (January 2023) and excluding MD PhD candidates.

⁴<https://ind.nl/en/required-amounts-income-requirements#application-for-a-residence-permit-as-a-researcher-guest-lecturer-or-physician-in-training-to-be-a-specialist>

⁵<https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2022/11/20/ongemak-en-schaamte-over-de-opmars-van-gratis-promovendi-a4148757>

⁶<https://www.ftm.nl/artikelen/chinese-onderzoekers-uitgeknepen-door-nederlandse-universiteiten>

candidates still require supervision and make use of the available facilities, institutes do not have to pay them any salary (apart from possible top-ups) but in the end still receive government funding (the so-called ‘promotiebonus’) of more than 83,000 euros⁵ for each candidate who successfully obtains their doctorate degree. In principle, this enables institutes to offer PhD positions to more candidates, some of which might otherwise not have gotten the opportunity to pursue a doctoral degree, because there would not have been any money available to create the PhD position they currently hold.

Considerations

International bursary PhD candidates are not getting equal remuneration for what is in essence the same work as employed PhD candidates do. The fact that international scholarship PhD candidates often live under precarious conditions, struggling to get by and with much fewer rights than employed PhD candidates, is unacceptable. Although PNN is aware of the delicate nuances surrounding this discussion (especially with regards to the number of available PhD positions), it is of the opinion that this does not outweigh the argument that every working person in the Netherlands deserves to be decently compensated according to legal and conventional standards.

PNN is not against scholarships from foreign institutions for individual PhD candidates, but believes these scholarships should ideally be paid to the research institute of the PhD candidate directly. The institute can then hire the PhD candidate as an employee and use the scholarship to pay part of the salary, similar to what currently happens if a researcher has obtained a grant with which they wish to hire PhD candidates. In such a scenario, international PhD candidates with a scholarship would still be attractive to employ, as the costs would still be lower than for a ‘regular’ employed candidate without own funding.

Our position

PNN’s position is that the status of ‘scholarship candidate’ should disappear. Every PhD candidate who conducts research in the Netherlands should be employed and all PhD candidates should have the same legal rights and obligations.

PNN realises the above is a long-term ambition. It requires a fundamental restructuring, including a reallocation of and/or increase in funding. This cannot be arranged overnight. Therefore, PNN’s short-term ambition is that the situation of bursary PhD candidates should be improved. Their rights and (legal) position should be clearly defined. There should be top-up schemes available at every institute, such that all PhD candidates at the very least receive a monthly amount that is higher than the minimum wage. In addition, travel expenses should be covered and formal sick and pregnancy leave agreements should be established.