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**From “profkip” to strong teams: what does
PhD supervision require?**

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From “profkip” to strong teams: what does PhD supervision require?

With the [launch of a campaign to combat “profkippen,”](#) *De Jonge Akademie* rightly signals that there are clear differences in supervision within the Dutch system. Some PhD candidates meet their supervisors weekly, others once a month, or even less. It is plausible that these differences affect the quality of supervision and the research that thereby becomes possible.

We also recognize a core point that *De Jonge Akademie* puts sharply on the agenda: a strong concentration of PhD candidates with a limited number of supervisors holding the *ius promovendi* is not ideal. This can lead to less availability per PhD candidate and less room for other researchers to take on supervisory roles. *De Jonge Akademie’s* proposal to explore a cap on the number of PhD candidates supervised simultaneously therefore deserves serious attention—precisely as an instrument to curb excesses and to better protect supervision as a core academic task.

At the same time, numbers are not the whole story. The proposal rightly addresses a distribution issue—some researchers supervise many PhD candidates, others few—but the question is also how that redistribution plays out in practice. How is a supervisory team composed after an expansion of the *ius promovendi*? What division of tasks prevents conflicts of interest? And how many such teams can the Dutch academic system actually facilitate? Numbers only become truly meaningful if we make explicit how supervision is organized, what role division supports PhD quality, and how much supervisory capacity the system has as a whole. From the perspective of PhD candidates, these are not side issues, but conditions for supervision of good quality.

To help move *De Jonge Akademie's* proposal forward, we suggest putting three questions at the center of the discussion.

1. What is the right scale at which to talk about supervision?

Discussions about PhD supervision are often approached as a one-to-one relational matter. But it is not only the formal promoter who is responsible for supervising PhD candidates. In most disciplines, supervision is carried out by teams of senior and junior researchers. That is where feedback, guidance, and substantive direction are shaped. If we talk about “numbers,” it is therefore important to look not only at the administrative promoter role, but also at the place where supervision is actually organized: the supervisory team. Supervision is a socio-professional process that requires time and attention, but also experience.

Fields also differ greatly. In one discipline, work is done in larger groups with high publication volumes; in another, in small clusters with longer research cycles. A norm can be useful to limit concentration and excesses, but it does require context. A supervisor with many PhD candidates may, depending on workload and team structure, have more supervision time than someone in a teaching-intensive role who supervises only one PhD candidate. The discussion about numbers is therefore only truly meaningful if it is accompanied by a conversation about available time, role division, and team capacity per PhD candidate.

2. What does expanding the *ius promovendi* do to supervisory practice?

A redistribution implies that more researchers—often relatively junior—can supervise PhD candidates and, with the *ius promovendi*, award the doctoral degree. This development offers opportunities for career development and recognition, and we understand well why *De Jonge Akademie* points to the bottleneck that many u(h)d's in practice carry major supervisory responsibility while the *ius* is not always granted smoothly or transparently. At the same time, broadening raises a practical question: how do we ensure that expansion goes hand in hand with clear standards for supervision quality and with a division of roles that protects the educational purpose of the PhD candidate?

PhD trajectories have a double purpose: the PhD candidate is trained to become an independent researcher, and at the same time, the research project is carried out. These purposes seem congruent, but they can clash. In many cases, research proposals are written by postdocs, assistant professors, associate professors, or full professors, who thereby shape their own research direction. Within the supervisory team, a tension then emerges between training and positioning. Supervisors are assessed on visibly measurable output such as publications, grants, and media appearances. For PhD candidates, those same moments are crucial for learning how academia functions and for acquiring their own position. Who speaks, who appears, who has ownership, and who becomes author (and in what order) is therefore not a trivial matter.

It is also important to prevent this debate from being read as a contrast between “junior” and “good.” That is not our starting point. Our starting point is that these structural tensions call for a team setup that protects the PhD candidate. In many cases, it is therefore desirable that the supervisory team include at least one experienced supervisor who can steer, help weigh interests, distribute responsibilities, and actively safeguard the educational purpose. That is not a disqualification of junior supervisors, but a safety net for the PhD candidate and a way to give less experienced researchers room to carry responsibility within clear safeguards.

3. Is this a redistribution issue or a capacity issue?

We share the concern about profkippen and endorse that redistribution can be part of the solution. At the same time, the question remains how much supervisory capacity is available in total. To safeguard supervision qualitatively, not only a distribution is needed, but also sufficient time, expertise, and seniority within supervisory teams. If the total number of PhD positions exceeds the available supervision time and seniority, redistribution can shift pressure without the underlying scarcity disappearing. In the Netherlands, too little explicit thought is still given to that supervisory capacity. The number of PhD positions is currently primarily driven by available research funding, with supervisory capacity hardly being taken into account.

De Jonge Akademie rightly problematizes the inequality in how PhD candidates are distributed across supervisors. We too see “profkippen” and share that concern. But the

conversation should not only be about who has how many PhD candidates, but also about how many PhD candidates the Dutch academic system as a whole can sustain. In recent years, Dutch research institutions have trained more PhD candidates without clearly defining what conditions are necessary for that. The core question is whether the system, given the available supervision time, remains capable of delivering PhDs of sufficient quality—and who bears the consequences when that is not the case.

For PhD candidates, these are not marginal differences. The amount of available supervision time determines how much room there is for training, for making mistakes, and for absorbing unforeseen circumstances. A PhD trajectory is not an exam, and a promoter is not an invigilator: PhD candidates are trained to become independent colleague-researchers. That requires time, access to expertise, and connection to relevant research networks. If that capacity is scarce, the Dutch academic system cannot keep expanding the demand for PhD positions without making sharp choices about it.

In conclusion

De Jonge Akademie has rightly opened the debate on numbers and concentration. From the perspective of PhD candidates, that debate is important and necessary, but it can only really move things forward if we connect it to a national conversation about available supervision time, the composition of supervisory teams, and the way conflicts of interest and supervision quality are carefully safeguarded. PNN is happy to contribute as a conversation partner in that next step: precisely because PhD candidates directly experience the consequences of choices in organization and capacity, their perspectives can help formulate norms and preconditions that work in practice. Only in that combination can instruments such as a cap and a broadening of the right to award the doctorate genuinely contribute to better supervision and to the quality of the training of a new generation of scientists.

PhD Candidates Network Netherlands (PNN).