Frequently Asked Questions by PhD-students

A. General info
1. SENSE is the research school this department is linked with. You can take courses here, and if you graduate you get a nice certificate.
2. There is an education course (training in didactic skills) that all PhD students need to take and is announced via the secretary. The only exception is for PhD students who studied at the Radboud University and took the course for teaching during their bachelor or master degree.
3. If you finish within four years (hand in the book to the commission) you can apply for a bonus of 1500 euros. See https://www.ru.nl/iwwr/phd-information/financial-information/
4. For all forms, see https://www.radboudnet.nl/bsi/phd-students-0/documents-forms-phd/

B. Research
1. Do I need to write a proposal?
You should discuss this with your supervisor, but in general the answer is yes. During the first year, a PhD-student is expected to write down an outline of the PhD-project, usually based on the proposal used for obtaining the grant. The outline (3-5 pages) should give a general description of the objectives, methods and planning of the research and an overview of the thesis chapters. Preferably, this proposal will be submitted to the SENSE research school that the department is linked to, for quality control (http://www.sense.nl). For NWO-projects this formal quality control process is not necessary, because proposals for NWO-grants have already undergone an extensive review. However, yet it is recommended to write and submit a proposal, to help you to keep focus.

2. How many research chapters should I write?
The quantity is dependent on the entire process of writing (when aiming for Nature or Science the quantity cannot be high), however in general there should be four, preferably five, chapters. These are to be submitted to scientific peer-reviewed journals or books. In case of five chapters/articles, one may be written as a second author. When the synthesis chapter is submitted/accepted as a journal article, it also counts as a research chapter.

3. When should my first paper be ready?
Typically at the end of the first year. If there is substantial empirical work to be carried out, somewhat later.

4. What if my appointment lasts for less than 4 years?
The demands will be tailored proportionally.

5. How much time can I spend on other activities?
A maximum of 20% of the total time may be spent on providing/attending courses, supervising BSc-MSc students, and participating in committees (PON, IWWR, SENSE). Supervision of students can contribute to your research project. If the work of a master student contributes substantially to your research, extra time can be spent on supervision.
C. Education attended

1. Do I need to write an education plan?
Yes, during your first 3 months you are expected to write a project plan (PP) and a training and supervision plan (TSP; http://www.ru.nl/phd/programmes_and/general/) according to the faculty’s standards (in Dutch: opleidings- en begeleidingsplan (OBP)). If it is decided to take part in the research school SENSE (see question 7), you are also expected to draw up an education plan in accordance with the standard format to be approved by SENSE (ITSP; http://www.sense.nl/downloads/1960).

2. Do I need to obtain a SENSE certificate?
Participation in SENSE can be very useful in some cases. Participation will be decided together with your supervisor. In some cases (projects) it could be mandatory.

3. How do I select courses?
First, think about the skills that you need during and after your PhD-project. Next, find the technical, communication, management courses that cover your needs:
- SENSE offers a wide range of PhD courses in environmental, ecological and other disciplines, as well as PhD courses on project and time management (http://www.sense.nl).
- The university offers several PhD courses on general skills, concerning for example management for PhD-students and planning and design of a PhD-project. Courses are available here: https://www.ru.nl/phd/courses/courses/
- Talk to your fellow (older year) PhD students which courses they experienced as useful.

According to the faculty’s standards, the RU course “management voor promovendi” is obliged for all PhD students. The feasibility of following this course is to be discussed with your supervisor.

D. Education provided

1. How much time should I spend on providing courses and supervising BSc-MSc students?
As a rule of thumb, PhD-students are expected to spend up to 10% (of the 20% set in question 5) of their time on educating BSc-MSc students. This is a general university rule. On average in our department, however, PhD-students spend less time on providing education.

2. How can I attract BSc-MSc students to help me with my research?
Write a short project description, inform the internship coordinator of the department (Rob Lenders) about it and put it on your profile on the department’s website.

3. How can I specialize in teaching?
The IOWO offers didactical courses up to official education certificates (University Teaching Qualification (UTQ). In the future, UTQ (BKO in Dutch) will be mandatory for academic positions in The Netherlands. So, if you pursue an academic career, it would be advantageous to make a start with UTQ during your PhD-project. This is not mandatory in any way for getting your PhD. Information on the demands to obtain your UTQ can be found at https://www.ru.nl/lecturers/professionalisation/university-teaching-qualification-utq/.
E. Meetings

1. Which conferences can I visit and how often?
Please consult your supervisor. Usually, one international conference per year should be possible, provided that you give a platform or poster presentation there. You are encouraged to visit national conferences as well, again preferably with a presentation.

2. How do I prepare my evaluation talk?
Beforehand, fill out the unofficial form of the department (to be obtained from secretary) and the first part of the official form (see link general info) and send it to your supervisors. They use it to start the conversation and to identify discussion points. After the evaluation talk, fill out the rest of the official forms, have it checked and signed by your supervisors, and send it to the secretary.

3. Which meetings am I expected to attend?
Being a member of this department also requires you to be involved in its activities:
- Department meetings with one PhD-student presenting his/her latest progress and discussing scientific bottlenecks with all colleagues and one presentation of a MSc-student, every Thursday at 16:00h.
- Staff meeting on non-scientific issues of general interest, chaired by a PhD student, every six weeks on Monday morning.
- Annual department day-in with presentations from the permanent staff to keep each other informed about ongoing research, or in the form of discussion groups to increase interactions between people from the department (environmental science day-in, mandatory).
- Annual department day-out: excursion to have fun together.
- Annual IWWR-day focussed on PhDs presenting their work via a presentation, poster, and poster pitches (mandatory).
- IWWR seminars (optional: judge for yourself whether the topic is of interest to you).

E. Supervision

1. What is the role of the PhD-student and the supervisor/(co-)promotor?
The PhD-student writes the thesis under daily supervision of the co-promotor, with contributions of the promotor where needed. In some cases, the daily supervision is provided by the promotor. The supervision should be tailor-made. The details are also written down in the TSP. For every PhD-project a formal start meeting is organized in which the general project planning is discussed. Further, the expectations from both the supervisor and the PhD-student are expressed and general issues related to the research process are agreed upon. Questions to be addressed include:
   - When to expect input from your supervisor/promotor?
   - How much time to spend on an issue before asking for help?
   - Who to consult for daily problems, structural problems, long-term planning problems?
   - How to monitor the process and ensure the planning is achieved or adapted if needed?
   - With which frequency do you have to keep your promotor updated?
The agreements are written down and will be evaluated and adapted if needed in the course of the PhD-project (every year update of the TSP).

2. How self-reliant should I be?
A PhD-student should consult her/his supervisor timely, as rule of thumb at least every two weeks. The interaction decreases in the course of time, but mostly varies with the stages of your research. However, being self-reliant does not mean you have to try to solve your problems all by yourself. If you are stuck with something for a day it is wise to find help from other PhD-students or your supervisor.

3. What can I ask my supervisor?
Everything!

4. What skills should I have required at each stage of the project?
There is no general timeline for the skills to be obtained in the course of a PhD-project. It is possible to regularly evaluate your skills with your supervisor, e.g. by discussing the progress after each submitted article. The initiative for these evaluations lies with the PhD-student.

5. What skills should I have required at the end of the project?
Apart from a thesis, you should be able to design and carry out scientific studies independently, from writing a proposal to communicating your results in oral and written outlets. Independent is not synonymous to alone, by contrast, you should be able to involve experts for specific tasks as well. Furthermore, you should be able to help other PhD students and discuss your and their work together. For Europe, there are so-called Dublin descriptors for qualifications of BSc, MSc, and PhD students. These are set to strive for a comparable level in Europe and to give insight in the differences between the three university levels. Although the descriptors are somewhat vague, it might be helpful to consult them (http://www.nvao.net/page/downloads/Dublin_Descriptoren.pdf).

6 How do I know that I am performing well/badly?
Ask feedback on regular basis and/or during the annual performance interview. Your daily supervisor(s) should be clear about their opinion on your performance.

7. How much of my own ideas can I put forward?
All ideas are welcome and encouraged, also to enhance discussion and further interaction with your supervisor(s).

8. How am I evaluated?
PhD-students are usually appointed for 4 years with a go/no go decision to be made in an evaluation interview after 1 or 1.5 years. The progress thereafter is assessed in annual performance interviews. To prepare for these interviews, make a list of products, plans, papers, courses attended/given, students supervised and related tasks.

9. What are the guidelines for obtaining a PhD?
See www.ru.nl/phd
F. Budget

1. Is it possible to spend part of my PhD abroad?
Yes, the department encourages PhD-students to visit relevant groups abroad.

2. What budget do I need for the stay abroad?
Costs for housing and transport may be reimbursed as a minimum. Depending on the project budget and additional grants awarded (Socrates, Erasmus and others to be consulted) other costs may be covered as well. For more information, contact the International Office (https://www.ru.nl/io/english/phd-candidates/financing-international-mobility/outgoing-mobility-0/financing-possibilities-within-europe/).

3. How much can I spend on courses, books, materials, congresses etc.
This depends on your needs and the resources available in the project and is to be discussed with your supervisor on beforehand.

G. Other

1. What should I do if my supervisors cannot solve my problems?
In some cases it might be difficult to discuss your problems with your supervisor(s). You might consult another PhD-student or another staff member you feel comfortable with. If no one at the department can help you out, you can consider external coaching, (https://www.radboudnet.nl/english/employees/career/training-courses/personal-development/coaching-for-staff-members/).

2. What should I do when I have a conflict with my supervisor?
When you cannot solve it directly with your supervisor, you can consider to talk to your second supervisor, if you have one. Also, please consult other PhD students, they could advise you what to do.
Another option is to step to the department head or another permanent staff member, who you feel comfortable with. They are always open to help you solve the issue and to mediate, while keeping anything you said confidential if you want this.
If nothing of the above helps, you can consider stepping to the confidential counsellor for PhD candidates: https://www.ru.nl/iwwr/phd-information/confidential-counselor-phd-candidates/

3. What should I do if I am discriminated, threatened, intimidated, bullied or experiencing any other type of physical or mental violence?
If possible, please report this to the head of the department. If not, contact the official mediator, i.e. labour conflict advisor via https://www.radboudnet.nl/english/employees/more-information/complaints-and-conflicts/