

Joanneke Bruins & Stynke Castelein



GET YOUR  
PHD

with

GLEE!

Boom

# Get your PhD with glee!

Jojanneke Bruins & Stynke Castelein

**Boom**

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# Preface

In this book you will come across all kinds of questions that you might encounter as a PhD student in the Netherlands. Because, how do you actually obtain a PhD position? How do you start your research? What exactly are the meetings with your PhD supervisors for? What do you have to think about when writing and publishing scientific papers? What does a PhD thesis actually look like? How are you going to complete it in the upcoming years? What preparations should you make for the big day when you actually obtain your PhD? And how should you carefully prepare for that scary defense? Thinking about all the things that are part of being a PhD candidate would almost make your head spin. Even more so when there are all kinds of written and, more importantly, unwritten rules you need to know.

Don't worry, because you are certainly not the only one! Every other PhD student before you has also asked themselves these questions. Including us, when we were working on our own PhD research. This book can help you navigate your way through the wonderful world of becoming a scientist by obtaining your PhD. All kinds of advice and anecdotes from day one to the bittersweet end of a doctoral research project are included in this book. We hope these tips will offer you support and tools during the tougher times, and that the bloopers and peculiar experiences of your predecessors will bring a smile to your face. Go get them, and above all, enjoy this special learning period in your life!

Jojanneke Bruins & Stynke Castelein\*

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\* Shared first authorship.





# Chapter 1

## Look before you leap

Know what you are getting yourself into, if you want to get your PhD...

Just kidding! Working on your PhD research is a lot of fun! But, it is also a form of top-class sport. It demands a lot from you in terms of planning, organizing and learning different skills, such as data analysis and scientific writing. Don't worry, no one expects you to be able to do everything on your very first day. You (generally) have four years to become proficient in a variety of areas. You will likely encounter many different people from whom you can learn, among others your supervising team, fellow researchers and other coworkers. Yet, at times, doing PhD research can also be lonely, especially when you spend hours and hours at your desk writing that PhD thesis. At those times, it makes a huge difference if you are genuinely interested in your research topic. But how do you get a PhD position? And what should you pay attention to when you apply for it?

### How do you get a PhD position?

You have your master's degree under your belt. You find science incredibly interesting, that thesis was actually quite fun to write and

doing statistics was not as scary as you thought. You have made up your mind: you are going to be a researcher! Great! Now, how do you become one? If you really want to work as a researcher, there is really only one logical step after your master's degree: a PhD project. But how do you find a job as a PhD candidate?

### ► Job sites

A useful website is [www.academictransfer.com](http://www.academictransfer.com). This job site specifically focuses on jobs in academia. You can indicate that you are looking for a PhD position in a particular field, such as behavioral and social sciences, economics, health or natural sciences. You can also use keywords to search specifically for research topics that interest you. This website also lists vacancies for PhD positions abroad. Most job listings for PhD candidates in the Netherlands will also appear on general job sites.

### ► 'Working at' pages

Another tip is to do a targeted search on the job listing pages of universities, academic institutions and other organizations that offer PhD positions. For example, if you would like to work in a particular area or at a specific organization, this is often the quickest way to see if they have job openings for PhD projects that suit you.

### ► Ne(a)tworking

Furthermore, it is always smart to do some networking. When you meet relevant people, they can point you to possible interesting vacancies within their own network. When someone knows you from his or her network, for example through a positive internship or thesis experience, you often have an edge when you apply for a job. It will increase your chances of being invited for an interview. Another good place to network is at conferences and symposia featuring the topics that interest you. The visitors and speakers at these meetings are often useful contacts whom you can talk to during breaks and during the drinks afterwards. Nowadays, digital networking through web-

sites such as LinkedIn is of course a must. Here you can easily connect in a low-key way with people in the field that appeals to you.

### **Anecdotal evidence**

A PhD student got her first research job by making a positive impression on her thesis supervisor. This one project eventually became a PhD thesis, with the original thesis supervisor eventually becoming her main PhD supervisor.

### **► Writing your own application**

Sometimes universities have a program where you can write your own internal grant application for a PhD position while you are doing a research master's. In these cases, you are basically doing the preliminary work for your PhD research while you are getting your master's. If the grant is awarded, you move on to a PhD position immediately after your master's. If you have a good idea for a PhD subject, you could also see if you can write an external grant application in collaboration with a postdoctoral researcher and/or a professor. The benefit is that you then do not have to apply; the downside is that this is often a long, time-consuming process.

### **► What if you already have a job?**

You may of course already have a job, while your research ambitions are starting to stir (again). If you would like to do a PhD within the field you are already working in, a good first step is to talk to your current supervisor. Explain your ambition to do a PhD and explore whether there are possibilities within your current job and organization. It is possible that there are internal routes, or you could create a PhD position yourself through an external grant. The company you work for might have some interest in letting you get your PhD too, for example if you develop a new technique which will benefit the com-

pany you work for directly. Perhaps they will be willing to free up time within your contract to devote some hours to research. Then all you have to do is get a university and an interested professor within your field involved to obtain your PhD.

### Anecdotal evidence

A PhD student first started as a research coordinator. This job increased her passion for doing research and she became interested in a specific topic. Through an external grant, she then created her own PhD position on this topic.

### ► The golden tip?

Quite honestly, there really is no golden tip. One tip we would like to give you is to make good use of your time as a bachelor's and master's student. Although internships and master's theses are mandatory parts of many studies, you should consider them an opportunity for your future. By showing commitment and doing a good job, you can make a good impression on the people who are supervising you and could possibly help you find a nice job later on. Do not underestimate the effect of a good impression, even if you only perceive yourself as "just" a student!

## Applying for a PhD position

It is the end of the afternoon, you mindlessly scroll through the job listings with a cup of tea in your hand and: BAM! There it is, the PhD position of your dreams! Or at the very least one that piques your interest. You are going to apply for this one. The big question is of course what you should put in your letter and on your resume in order to receive an invitation for an interview.

### ► Avoid clichés

What we particularly advise against is creating one standard letter, and only changing the one sentence about the job itself for each new job listing. That usually does not make much of an impression. It significantly reduces your chances of being invited for an interview. In order to increase your chances of being invited, it is better to write a specific letter that matches the specific vacancy.

### ► Meaningful motivation

Experience is something you can gain, but motivation is something you must have. So make sure that your motivation for this particular PhD project stands out very clearly in your letter. What is the research about, and why do you consider this an interesting project? It could be anything, of course. For example, would you really like to do a PhD on this specific topic, or are you particularly interested in the target group being researched? If anything, explain where your motivation comes from.

Of course, your motivation can also simply be that you would very much like to become a researcher. In that case, write about your ambition to become the best researcher who ever existed and how you plan to apply your enthusiasm to the PhD research you are applying for. However, do take into consideration that a meaningful motivation related to the content of the project often gives you an edge when you are among the final candidates.

### ► Embrace your workplace

Look beyond the research topic alone, and also look into the organization or department you would be working for. You may prefer to do your PhD research within a particular organization or department, or even with specific researchers. If you state in your letter of application why you would like to work at this place or with these people, this will certainly increase your chances of being invited for an interview.