

VLAG PhD Research Proposal procedure – January 2020 onwards

Updated version May 2025

Based on our experiences, we would appreciate it if you could pay attention to the following elements to guarantee timely feedback for PhD candidates and keep the process manageable.

- PhD candidates and supervisors: please, submit the PhD Research Proposal within 6 months after the start of the PhD project in Hora Finita and make sure to fill out **all fields in the template**. Digital signatures are allowed, so please do not let a missing signature postpone submission.
 - Make sure to adhere to the minimum and maximum number of words per section as indicated in the template.
 - All VLAG PhD research proposals are expected to include a description of potential ethical dilemmas and considerations. Ethical dilemmas deal with the design, execution and outcomes of the research project and its effect on e.g. society, people, animals and ecosystems. It is important to present your considerations clearly and transparently.
 - Wageningen University has various relevant ethical clearance procedures. The WUR Research Ethics Committee (REC) provides advice and ethical clearance for all non-medical research plans with human participants. The “Medisch Ethische Toetsingscommissie” assesses research projects according to the legal criteria for medical research (METC). Animal experiments should be approved by the Animal-Experiments Committee (DEC). Check together with your supervisors if action is required by any of these committees, and take care of the appropriate submission.
- Supervisors: it is up to you to decide when the quality of the proposal is sufficient for submission. Your role is to guide, teach and coach the PhD candidate in the writing process, including the writing of the rebuttal. This can be helpful in getting an idea about the support the candidate will need in future writing tasks and can be informative for the go/no-go evaluation.
- Supervisors/researchers who are approached as reviewers: please answer our request as soon as possible and if you have no time to commit yourself to writing high-quality feedback, let us know right away and suggest one or more colleagues from your group who might be willing and capable of doing the job.

Background and aims

The PhD research proposal is a crucial step and an important educational element of the PhD training program (4 ECTS, 112 hours). Approval of the research proposal is a prerequisite for the [go/no-go evaluation](#). All PhD candidates are required to write and submit their research proposal [within 6 months](#) after the onset of the PhD project. We ask our new PhD candidates to demonstrate ownership of their project by writing their proposal in their own words, addressing a set of predefined topics, and putting it in an up-to-date perspective. The PhD research proposal needs to be written by the candidate with consultation and feedback from the supervisory team before submitting it. Even when a peer-reviewed grant proposal is already available at the start of the PhD project, we expect the PhD candidate to work out their take on the matter and develop this into a VLAG PhD research proposal. This will not only help to improve their writing skills but will also stimulate reflection and discussions between the PhD candidate and the supervisory team. Getting acquainted with writing a rebuttal to feedback is an additional valuable learning goal for the PhD candidate.

Submission

To ensure that all aspects are being dealt with, a VLAG PhD research proposal template has been created (https://www.vlaggraduateschool.nl/en/phd-candidates/starting_phd-1.htm). When the

proposal is completed and approved by the supervisors, the proposal has to be submitted in Hora Finita within 6 months after the start of the PhD project.

Reviewer

After consultation with their supervisory team, each candidate submits the names of two possible reviewers. The supervisory team is required to contact one of these reviewers in advance and ensure commitment to completing the review within two weeks after receipt of the proposal from VLAG Office.

VLAG will collect feedback from one of these reviewers, who will be asked to evaluate the proposal from the perspective of a senior mentor. In many cases, a VLAG colleague from a neighboring chair group or research institute could be a pragmatic and relevant choice. In some cases, supervisory teams prefer a non-WUR reviewer (e.g. VLAG alumnus). In any case, the reviewer should not be part of the research group(s) of the members of the supervisory team, and should not be involved in the PhD project.

Rebuttal and approval

The PhD candidate is asked to return a rebuttal digitally to the VLAG Office (vlag@wur.nl) within 1 month after receiving the review report. In many cases, the suggestions of the reviewer may lead to further improvement of the proposal. In exceptional cases, major revisions may be needed before the proposal is approved. Therefore, in both cases also an updated version of the proposal has to be sent to VLAG Office.

The decision regarding the approval of the research proposal is based on the report of the reviewer, the rebuttal of the candidate, and potential amendments to the PhD research proposal. The rebuttal will only be sent to the reviewer by VLAG Office upon their request.

When the final version of the proposal is approved, we will upload it in Hora Finita.