

VLAG PhD Research Proposal procedure – January 2020 onwards

Updated version December 2021

Based on our experiences from the first 18 months, we ask for your attention to the following aspects to make it possible for the PhD candidates to receive timely feedback and keep the procedure manageable

- PhD candidates and supervisors: please, submit the PhD Research Proposal within 6 months after the start of the PhD project 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.
- 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 reviewer: 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 an important educational element of the PhD training program (4 ECTS, 112 hours) and part of the formal admittance procedure at Wageningen University. All PhD candidates are required to write and submit their research proposal within 6 months after the onset of the PhD project. We ask from our new PhD candidates that they demonstrate ownership of their project by writing their project in their own words, addressing a set of predefined topics, and putting it in a perspective that is up-to-date. The PhD research proposal needs to be written by the candidate with consultation and feedback from the supervisory team prior to 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 his/her take on the matter and develop this into a VLAG PhD research proposal. This will not only help to improve his/her 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 is submitted in digital form (PDF) to the VLAG Office (vlag@wur.nl) within 6 months after the start of the PhD project.

Reviewer

After consultation with his/her supervisory team, each candidate submits the names of possible reviewers. 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. To avoid unnecessary delays, VLAG office will approach an expert from the same group in case of limited availability of the suggested three reviewers (e.g. based upon their suggestions).

In exceptional cases, supervisory teams prefer a non-WUR reviewer (e.g. VLAG alumnus). A non-WUR reviewer can only be nominated after having confirmed to the supervisory team to be willing to do so. In this case, it is enough to nominate only one reviewer.

In any case, the reviewer should not be part of the research groups 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 lies with the Scientific Director of VLAG and is based on the report of the reviewer, the rebuttal of the candidate, and potential amendments to the PhD research proposal. The rebuttal will not be sent to the reviewer by VLAG Office.