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betreft VLAG PhD research proposal  
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Dear VLAG PhD supervisors,

Currently, all PhD candidates within WUR are required to provide a description of their research proposal, within 6 months after the onset of the project (with motivated extensions possible), as a prerequisite for their registration and acceptance to the PhD programme. For this activity each VLAG PhD receives 4 ECTS (112 hours) as part of their training programme. Next to this, these proposals were to some extent considered to be useful for quality monitoring purposes. In daily practice, however, quite a bit of variation occurs in the way these proposals are drafted, and also in the way they are managed by VLAG. For example, not all PhD candidates write their proposal themselves but this is done by their supervisor. Also, the original project description is sometimes more or less copied, which might seem logical when there is an existing detailed outline already available. On top of this, the original idea of sending out all proposals for external review is not only no longer doable due to the administrative burden and impossibility to find enough reviewers, but often it also did not add much value in our opinion.

Taking all this into account we decided to change our procedures for the research proposals for all PhD candidates who start as of January 1<sup>st</sup> 2020 and use the proposal as an **important educational element** of the PhD training programme. This leading principle is also recognized by the other WUR graduate schools. To this end, we will ask from our new PhD students 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. This will not only help to improve their writing skills, but will also stimulate reflection and discussions between the PhD candidate and supervisory team. Getting acquainted with writing a rebuttal to feedback is an additional valuable learning goal for the PhD, which is highly valued by the VLAG PhD council.

The supervisor has a major role in this process; (s)he serves as teacher/coach in the writing process and decides on the required level of the proposal. The entire process can also serve as major input for the Go decision of the supervisory team.

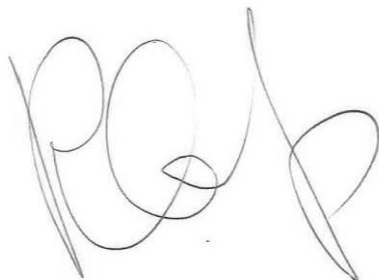
For a detailed description of the elements to be included in the PhD research proposal see the VLAG PhD research proposal template in the annex.

Undeniably, receiving feedback from an external scientist adds an extra dimension to the described process and helps the PhD candidate to become familiar with the review and rebuttal process. Also, it can give new insights. VLAG will facilitate the process by collecting feedback on the proposal from one reviewer, as suggested by the supervisory team. In many cases, a VLAG colleague from a neighbouring chair group or research institute could be a pragmatic and relevant choice. However, the reviewer can be anyone in the world as long as (s)he is not part of the research groups of the members of the supervisory team, and as long as (s)he is not involved in the PhD project. The reviewer will be asked to evaluate the proposal from the perspective of a senior coach. The PhD candidate will be asked to write a rebuttal to the review and submit it to the VLAG Office. The rebuttal will be assessed by the VLAG Director. She may then approve the proposal or ask the PhD candidate or the reviewer for additional input. Only in exceptional cases and when there is serious concern by the reviewer, the PhD candidate can be asked to append major revisions to the proposal before it is approved by VLAG.

All information needed can be found on the VLAG website: [www.vlaggraduateschool.nl](http://www.vlaggraduateschool.nl) > PhD candidates > Starting a PhD > Submitting PhD research proposal.

We expect this new way of working will improve the training of our PhD candidates. If you have additional suggestions or questions, please contact Anouk Geelen.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'RWitkamp', with a stylized, cursive script.

Prof. Dr Renger Witkamp  
Scientific Director VLAG

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'H. Bitter', with a stylized, cursive script.

Prof. Dr Harry Bitter  
Chair of the VLAG Board