

Speech by Emile Aarts on PhD Day, November 24, 2018, Tilburg University

Pressing concerns about PhDs: Interdependence, Contracts, Quality Control

Dear friends, colleagues, and doctoral students,

Welcome to Tilburg University. I am delighted that this year the organization has decided to hold the PhD Day here, in this beautiful university. My thanks go to *Promovendi Netwerk Nederland*, and especially to Jeff Smits and Anne de Vries.

Naturally, PhD students occupy a very special place in science, here at Tilburg and everywhere else. The future of science is in your hands. This is a particularly challenging task and heavy responsibility, especially today, with fake news everywhere and claims being founded on fake science. Many people are losing trust in science; some have even started to distrust science completely.

Today we are gathering to talk about what is going well with your work and your work relationships – and, especially, about what needs to be improved.

There has been much recent discussion on the frequently problematic position of PhD students. This has given me considerable cause for concern. I want to take this opportunity to name three of the most pressing of these concerns:

1. the interdependent relationship between PhD students and their supervisors;
2. dubious contracts; and
3. quality control.

1. Interdependence

Most of the complaints I hear about here at Tilburg have to do with scientific integrity, specifically with regard to the relationship between PhD students and their supervisors.

I see this relationship as an asymmetric one. It is often characterized, after all, by a strong dependency: one person explains what has to be done, and sets the criteria; the other, the PhD student, does the work.

Your position is therefore a very different one than, for example, that of a tenure tracker or a student. It is much more narrowly defined.

I hear professors talking about “my PhD students,” almost as if they were serfs. I have even described the position of PhD students as “the last form of slavery in the western world.”

This dependency often begins with the appointment itself, when a scientist acquires a PhD position through a grant and must then find a candidate. This immediately creates a lopsided relationship, because the candidate then depends, by definition, on the person who created the position. And, of course, “he who pays the piper calls the tune.”

This kind of dependency on one or more supervisors is not *necessarily* a problem. The relationship is often sound and honorable, and things go very well. But when either party is not fully aware of the inequality of this relationship, it can give rise to unpleasant and even risky situations that can have a serious impact on the exercise of science itself.

PhD students are members of a rather introverted culture, and perhaps they accept this subordinate role too readily – however mature and articulate they might otherwise be. For their part, supervisors often resent being called to account on this matter. And, yes: I do find this annoying.

The realization will often come after the successful conclusion of a doctoral period, when the so-called ‘psychological contract’ ends. The newly-graduated PhD researcher enters a new working situation, and sometimes finds that their supervisor is still using their research data, with no consultation or mention of their name in publications.

2. Dubious contracts

Universities are obliged to meet all kinds of quality standards with regard to their students and staff. Should the same standards not also apply to their treatment of doctoral students?

Dubious contracts and undesirable work situations should be prevented. And this needs to be done in a clear and transparent way.

We need to set up more monitoring. We need to examine how universities treat their doctoral students. We should map the processes involved, and show that we’re in control.

Research schools, which are accountable for the quality of their PhD tracks, are in principle the party responsible for taking these steps. This is already working well in some places – but not everywhere.

Doctoral contracts are often very badly put together. It is actually outrageous, for instance, that they can be renegotiated or extended without any form of legitimization.

And let us remember that many doctoral students will end up having careers *outside* of academia, and should therefore be better prepared for them. This means learning to do more than just publish papers. Education is part of this. But here, too, PhD students and supervisors often find themselves in conflict.

3. Quality control

A PhD course needs to meet professional standards. That is to say: there should be agreements on mutual expectations; there should be interim reflection and evaluation moments; and there should be clear understandings about duration. Performance levels need to be made explicit. And these conversations need to be held from the very start.

It should not even be possible that someone performs three or four years of doctoral research and then fails to graduate.

It should also not be possible – though it regularly occurs – that after four years a mentor says: “Well, just put in another six months.” To my mind, this is completely inappropriate. Things should be arranged in a more professional way.

We need an effective, integrated quality control for doctoral students. So we have to define the processes that comprise a doctoral course of study. This is not going to be easy, because there are forces at work which benefit from the existing system.

At Tilburg, we have taken our first steps in this direction. For example, two years ago we set up our own PhD Council to discuss issues with the executive board. But this on its own will not be enough, as I have already indicated.

It is absolutely essential that we take the opportunity to listen to doctoral students, to personal experiences and critical notes.

Today, my good friends and colleagues, is just such a moment, when as managers and administrators we can listen carefully and reflect. When we can hear what the concerns are, and identify the barriers to progress.

Finally, I would like to wish you all a most inspiring and productive day, one from which we as managers may draw useful lessons.

Thank you.

Emile Aarts, rector