

# Blessings and concerns: Exploring the diversity of UvA PhD contracts

## Position paper Rethink Uva PhD Working Group

### Abstract

Based on these concerns and until recently largely unnoticed contractual variety, PhD rethink UvA aims to further spark the debate and set some agenda points for future PhD positions. Rather than to demand complete abolishment of contractual variety, it is clear that researchers with too few funds, support, and research time face grave and very stressful challenges. This suggests that it is necessary to discuss ways to ensure very basic support and transparency for all PhD related to UvA. Also, PhD Rethink aims to seriously explore the possibility of maintaining or reintroducing the *eerste geldstroom*, which has to be lobbied for across faculties and university, but also on a national level.

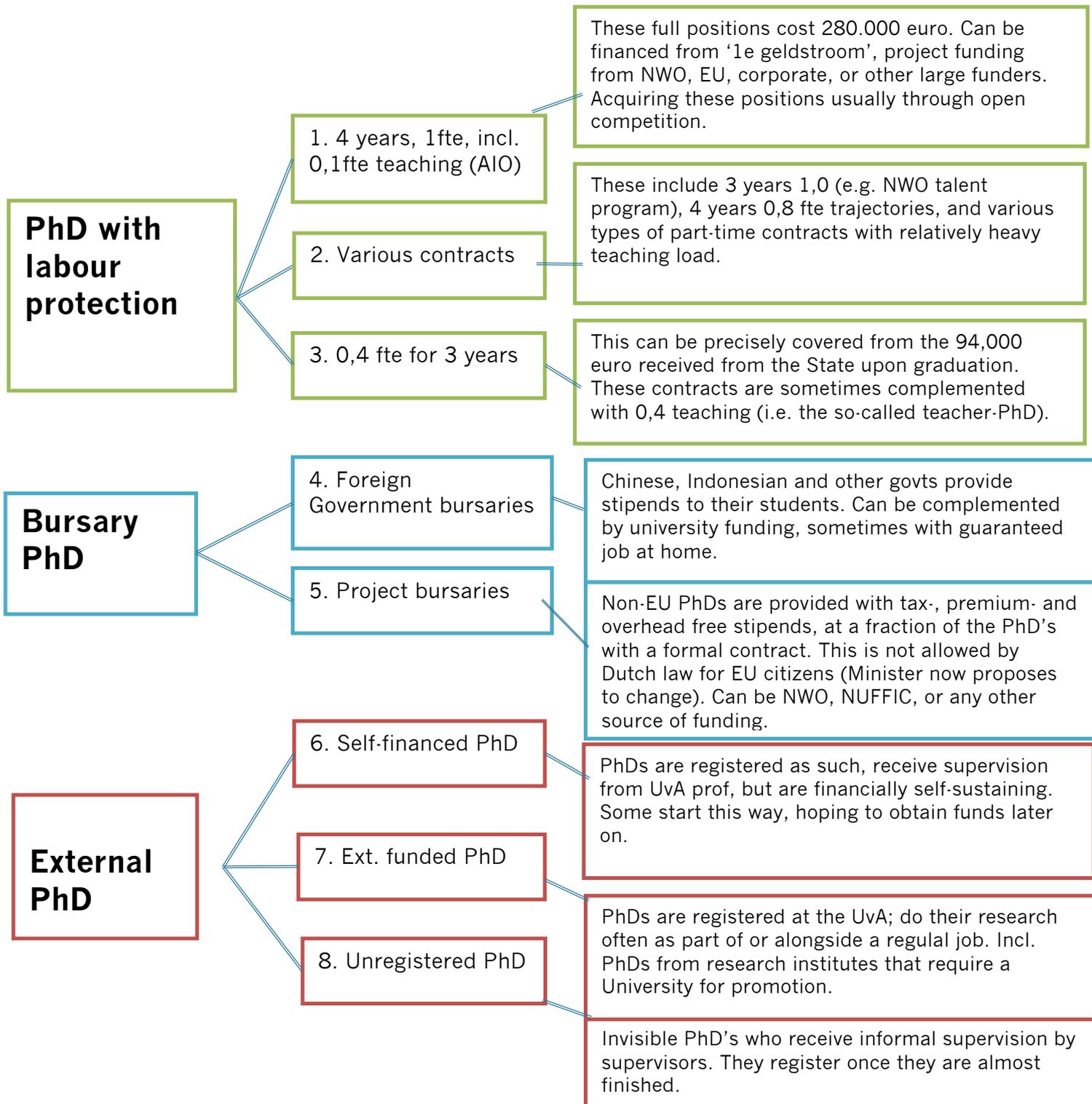
### Introduction: Typologies

Many PhDs have been active in the Rethink movement and share wider concerns of UvA staff. The ongoing activities and conversations have sparked discussion on issues that are specific to PhDs, both within the UvA and on a more general level. The Rethink PhD working group brought together a wide variety PhDs of many faculties, nationalities, and, as soon became clear, of very different stature. The discovery of a significant variety in contracts, of which many were unaware, raised important questions: what types of contracts does UvA offer its PhDs? What is the impact of these different contracts on individual researchers, their work environment, day-to-day practices, work load, as well as the PhD community as a whole?

This paper offers an overview of the various types of PhDs and some insight to the practical implications of this variety. It combines research into the structure of PhD contracts with a survey held among UvA PhDs, asking them to reflect on their experiences and to offer some feedback about their employment situation. The appendix (p. 5-10) contains an elaborate anonymized sample of this survey as well as its method and outline. While many PhDs are satisfied with their contracts and work environment, we have identified some serious concerns, particularly among PhD candidates with smaller, “messier” contracts, and among those with external or self-organized funding. Finally, we will relate some core issues to current political debates and future challenges.

In order to even begin to answer these questions, it is necessary to untangle the contractual variety. We have made three main distinctions in PhD typologies, namely: PhDs with labour protection (a labour contract), bursary PhDs, and external PhDs. Each type has three or two sub categories, which are schematized in the graph below. It is very important to realize that the graph does *not* display a hierarchy of finance with contracted PhDs receiving the most compensation for their research. The level of financing in fact varies greatly within each of these three types, ranging from a full salary for full-time research, to a meagre monthly stipend, or no funding at all.

**Graph 1: PhD Typologies**



## Experiences

What impact do these types of arrangements have on the status of the individual PhDs as well as the broader academic climate and community? In appendix A [p.5] all typologies are matched to the feedback we received from our short survey. Here, we offer a summary of the concerns in question.

The varied contract arrangements produced an equally varied range of responses. On the one hand, many PhDs are happy. It is clear that some of PhD candidates are very satisfied with their appointment and supervision, and enjoy their research as well as their work environment. As was to be expected, PhDs with a full contract - in earlier governmental descriptions also called AIO or OIO - commonly gave very positive feedback. Also, those with a 3 year (or four year 0,8 fte) were generally positive about their position and financing, although some did signal the pressure to achieve and produce (publications) from the start without leaving much time for exploration and personal development. Some shared feelings of insecurity about work opportunities and a future in academia. Others mentioned the sense of having to be extremely grateful for this type of arrangement and to receive a salary. Finally, the Non-EU students with government bursaries/stipends were generally positive and able to get by, albeit sometimes with a tight budget for living expenses.

On the other hand, we have identified some serious issues and concerns. Firstly, one of the greater concerns voiced by PhD candidates came from the ones with “combined contracts”, including PhD contracts with labour protection but no full-time research appointment. PhD candidates who are compensated less of have less time than other contracted PhD, for example because they have many teaching obligations (0.4 research and 0,4 teaching arrangements, but often having in practice around 1,5 fte workload), still have to produce the same amount of academic work. Also, they sometimes even have to finish within the same four or even three-year timeframe. All these PhDs are judged equally at the end of their project and might be criticized for delayed submission of their thesis. Thus as one respondent mentioned: “I have only three years (and less than part-time) to do what a “regular” PhD student has, four years and more or less full time, to do.”

In addition, the “combined contracts” include a wide variety of appointments, and, which might even be of greater impact on the trajectory, of length. Many of these types we can justly call “messier”; for instance a large teaching obligation in combination with only 1-2 years research funding. These arrangements are usually the result of personal lobbying by PhDs, and/or the efforts of supervisors trying to continue the project, but cause major concerns and stress on the researchers. Additional issues concern fieldwork or data gathering due to lack of research budget or to the lack of time free of teaching obligations. A related issue is the extent of available research budget, which not only differs per field/faculty but apparently also per contract.

The most severe complaints and negative responses came from the least visible group, the external PhD's. Shared issues are the pressure and workload of having to complete a PhD while working other jobs. Besides this plain lack of days in the week, other aspects also fall short, such as working space and even more basic services such as a library card or ID-login. More generally, the lack of communication and transparency with UvA creates a sense of distance and exclusion, feeling unwelcome and unwanted. In some cases this also regards the absence of formalization of status, as one respondent pointed out “I have never signed any formal document related to my PhD status.”

### **Future plans & concerns**

The survey and inventory of types have been a first exploration, with the survey meant to illustrate the variety in experience. While this is by no means a complete(d) investigation, it aims to address a number of questions pertaining to the future of the PhD position, both at the UvA and at a national level. First, we are in dire need of more numbers (see p.11). It is unclear how many of the different identified types of PhD's the UvA has in each faculty. Moreover, we are still unsure if the University has a clear overview of these numbers at all, particularly regarding external PhD's. Gathering these statistics and identifying the institutions and persons responsible of monitoring them is one of the core tasks still ahead of us.

Second, it is important to open the debate on to what extent the contractual variety is problematic. Is it unfair? How can we avoid first and second-class citizens in the PhD community? This especially concerns the recent debates around the (re) introduction of the bursary experiment: a proposal for new law allowing Dutch Universities to treat Dutch/EU PhD candidates as students rather than staff. Implications of this experiment are the introduction of a stipend rather than salary, which allows the 'production' of PhDs for 75,000 rather than 280,000 euros. This means: no social security, pension plan, unemployment insurance etc. It also leads to no or less overhead costs, which comprise the lion share of the current PhD costs - which makes it so attractive to administrators. Thus, the abolition implies loss of work space and research budgets, as well as supervision time. However, it is worth noting that our survey has clearly shown that the bursary student already exists at the UvA, in the form of agreements with other (non-EU) governments, for example the 25 PhD students in UvA who are under the sponsorship of China scholarship council.

At a national political level, a PhD positions is increasingly being framed as the "third" or final phase of the educational trajectory, rather than the start of an academic career. The emphasis on development of transferable skills, which also have their value outside academia, is one of the focal points, in addition to the extension of an educational program through the research schools. Apparently these changes in governance and political framing have in practice lead to a troubling diversity in contracts and positions, at the cost of offering young researchers a fruitful start as independent scholars. As one respondent from the faculty of law indicated; in 2012 there were still 10 PhD hired on *eerste geldstroom*. In 2014, there were five, and now it has been abolished. This is an alarming development".

## Appendix A: Survey linked to Typologies [graph 1]

Method			
<b>Our question:</b> We would much appreciate if you could describe – in just a few sentences - your particular contractual situation (please include at least the following: Dutch/EU/non-EU, are you formally employed or not, how much do you teach, how much do you get paid, for how many years, who is paying you, do you get other support, do you get meaningful supervision).			
<b>The request has been sent out in February 2015 through UvAPro.</b> <sup>1</sup>			
Type	Faculty	Positive	Negative
1	FMG FEB FNWI LAW	6 1 6 3	
2	FMG FEB FGW	3 1 3	2
3	FMG		3
4		2	
5	FNWI FMG	2 1	
6	FGW FMG		1 3
7	FGW		1
8	none		

### Type 1: The full contract PhD's

**Full contract (Dutch)** I am a Dutch PhD candidate at the FNWI, employed full-time by the UvA, and work on a project funded by NWO. I've been involved with teaching around 3 courses (of a single block, i.e., 1 or 2 months) in my 3 years so far. I have experienced no problem with regard to contractual situations and/or supervision and/or teaching load and/or salary things.

**Full contract (Dutch)** I'm a Dutch PhD candidate at UvA. The first three years is funded by a European project, the last year is funded by UvA. My contract is with the UvA, as an employee. My supervision is meaningful indeed: weekly meetings with a full professor, my promotor. Ten percent of time teaching is required for my type of contract, and there are enough opportunities to do this in courses that are sufficiently interesting to teach.

<sup>1</sup> This leads, however, to an enormous bias to staffed PhDs. Externals are not in this list, and neither are many bursaries.

**Full contract (FMG, Dutch).** I started my project in 2009 and got a contract for four years. I'm currently finishing my dissertation and I am working as a teacher within the UvA now (and getting paid accordingly). I always got a reasonable pay following the CAO. Also, I have enjoyed doing my research in this environment and got good training from my professors. Even though it took me longer to finish my dissertation, they kept supporting me without pressuring me to finish. So for me, being a PhD-student had been a very good experience within the UvA.

## Type 2: Various contracts

**2) In between contract (FMG, Dutch)** "I am quite satisfied with my contract, which is a 3-year full time contract without teaching in an EU funded project. ... The EU funding has been generous in terms of reimbursement of fieldwork costs. .... I have therefore no personal complaints and received very good supervision and mentoring. However, I always had the impression that I had to be extremely 'grateful' for this type of contract - whereas I think it should rather be the standard than the exception.

**2) 3- year contract** I'm a Dutch PhD student in the FMG faculty, My teaching load is generally low, but I think it's slightly ridiculous I'm teaching without any training.... [More in general] If we now don't get the time to develop ideas and to actually THINK instead of gathering data, doing an analysis, writing a paper, then when do I get to spend time on my own development? [...] I wonder whether I as a PhD got hired to become a good (or "excellent") researcher in the future, or just to produce four (preferably more) articles in three years with my supervisors' names on them, because I'm cheap, smart and fast, just to get replaced by the next cheap worker after I finish the PhD.

**2) In between contract (FEB, Dutch)** Although my official title is junior researcher. I got a position based on an EU funded project which my supervisors landed. However, this project lasts only 2 years, which means that I only get money for 2 year (0,75 ft the rest is funded by my teaching [...]) 0,25). A PhD contract for 2 years is not possible, so I got a junior researcher contract for 2 years with the promise that it will probably turn into a PhD contract later. Despite my contract I am treated like a PhD, get a lot of supervision and actually get paid a bit more (now 1,890 euro netto)

**2) In between contract (FMG, Dutch)** I started a research master in 2010 at UvA. Two months before I graduated, my supervisor won a grant and was able to hire me for 3 years full time. I was absolutely thrilled! I also have a considerable budget, able to cover conferences, workshops and even a stay abroad as a visiting student. Although it will be challenging to finish within three years, I am happy with my working conditions.

**2) In between contract (FGW, Dutch)** I received a full salary (0.8 FTE for 4 years) during my employment. When I was teaching, I got a supplementary contract for that period (e.g., 0.1 FTE for some months). I am now past the end of my contract but not finished yet (because of delays with testing participants). If all goes well I will get a little bit of funding for conference visits.

**2) In between contract (FGW, EU)** . I was very happy to get a funded position in 2011, meaning getting a contract for 0.8 fte research for 4 years. My month pay is conform the CAO. My contract is research only, but it was easy enough for me to find (i.e. actively asked for it) opportunities to co-

teach some courses in literary studies during my PhD, as well as to supervise theses. I received a complementary short term contract for my teaching hours. The university also supports me financially to go to conferences and to follow skill courses. The supervision I receive is very meaningful.

**2) External contract, (FMG, Dutch).** After having secured a research grant ... it turned out I would not be employed by UvA. Instead, I am employed by a research institute and 'detached' at UvA. It was promised that I will in any way be treated as a UvA PhD student. However, I have to make sure every time something is happening for UvA-PhD's, I am included as well. [I miss all the benefits of being a UvA staff member]. Also, it took me about 6 months of discussing with my official employer about getting the salary-raise from 1st to 2nd year PhD level. Furthermore, I am not on any list at the administration which makes it for example difficult to engage in teaching. I am teaching this semester for 4 hours a week ... I do not get any hours for it though (otherwise my co-teacher would get into trouble for not making enough teaching hours), I do it for my own experience.... Besides that, it is very unclear to me how much money is available per year for visiting conferences/seminars/summerschools. In the end, the issues are mostly solved, but it takes time and depends on me being vocal about it and the goodwill of the... administration.

**2) I'm a Dutch, FMG,** I've earned a normal PhD salary. I used the possibility to get parental-leave from the university, which really helped me out. I replaced someone else who had started a PhD but who, after a year or so, decided not to proceed. My first contract was for half a year (100% research, no teaching), in which I had to continue to work on a research my predecessor and two other PhD's for two other Dutch universities (who were part of the same research group) had worked on in order to satisfy the municipalities who have partly financed our projects and write a research proposal for my own research/ [...] After an evaluation of my work, I got a contract for two years (100% research, no teaching). These first 2 ½ years were paid by the municipalities, the [institute] and the UvA. It was for most of this period unclear what would happen after these two years. After another evaluation I got one more year. [...] So, in total, I've had 3 ½ years to finish my PhD, 100% research, no teaching.

**2) I'm a Dutch, FMG** I am a Dutch PhD candidate at the AISSR. I started at the FMG as a JuDo with a 0,6 fte teaching contract. In 2011, I was granted the opportunity to start my phd, which was funded by several means. First of all, I used a 'JuDo-beurs' (divided over five months), after that my programme group granted me 0,3 fte research time for 18 months, then the AISSR gave me another 0,3 fte for nine months and now I am currently in the final stages of my research, on an additional 0,2 fte grant by my programme group, for 6 months. Additional costs for field study and conferences were covered by extra scholarships I have applied for. During this time, I have always worked a teaching load of somewhere between 0,5 and 0,65 fte. Because of my teaching duties, I find it very hard to make time for conferences, reading groups or any other kind of Phd-related activities, apart from actually directly working on my thesis. I am rather worried that this will affect my future career. I have a great supervisor, who has been very helpful through all of this, also with getting the funding. I know my department regards me as a great example of how to combine teaching and research well, but it has been a very difficult couple of years, and I would not recommend it.

### **Type 3: The 0,4 PhD's.**

**3) 0,4 Contract (FMG, Dutch).** I have a 0,8 fte contract for three years and are supposed to teach at least 0.4 fte a year; meaning I have 0.4 fte over three years in which I should complete my phd. In reality I work a lot more than 0.8 fte, often 60+ hours a week and still I won't be able to finish within the three years. My funding comes directly from my research group.

**3) 0,4 Contract (FMG, Dutch)** I ... was hired ... [since] 2013 on a 3-year 0,4fte contract. This means that I have only three years (and less than half time) to do what a 'regular' PhD student (if they even still exist...?) has four years and more or less full time to do. Before my contract I had started off my 'buitenpromotie' (external PhD) some months earlier with another UvA research institute, who continue to host my office space and very kindly provide me with an extra 0,4fte job. My largest stress factor is obviously time, and after that money (or rather, the stability of an income). When I'm on field research, as I am now, my [other job] contract is ended and I have to make it on the 0,4fte wage plus my research budget (which is a max. of 3000 per year - too low, especially in a year wher 8 months are field research). This doesn't mean there are ways to beg and get extra funds, but I don't think that anyone likes begging for funds for something you're hired to do..

### **Type 4: Foreign Government Bursaries**

**4) Foreign Gov. Bursaries (non-EU).** I am with great pleasure that I could start the PhD study in UvA from 2014. I'm a 4-year candidate with scholarship from a Government institution (non-EU), who will pay me 1200 euro per month for 48 months. About teaching, I don't have the obligation to do this. The supervision from my two supervisors is significant and I deeply appreciate their help on my research.

**4) Foreign Gov. Bursaries (non-EU).** I'm from Southeast Asia. Concerning my contractual situation, I'm not employed by UvA and am considered an external PhD candidate doing my own individual project. I have been funded by my own government for living allowance and other costs relating to tuition fees. So, I do not have teaching obligation. In my first year, I was suggested my program group's manager that the UvA would claim the tuition fees from my government, at the amount of 12,000 Euro per year to support my fieldwork plan, conference participation expenses and fees, and cost of using the university's working space, equipment, and library. The program group through the UvA's financial department adds 300 Euro per month to my account as that time the program group's manager considered the amount i got, about 1,000 Euro per month was below living standard here. So, out of 12,000 Euro the UvA used my government's budget they claimed as 'tuition fees' to support my monthly allowance.

### **Type 5: The PhD with a bursary**

**5) Bursary, non-EU at FNWI.** I'm extremely happy with the quality of supervision, the quality of the staff and the collegiate nature of the group and the institute. Supervisors here take their roles much more seriously than in [...] where horror stories in every aspect are the norm. ... UvA have been great, they supported me and my phd project and when my [...] scholarship runs out they have

offered to pay me full time for the remainder of my phd. I am forever grateful and indebted to my professor and UvA for the flexible, pragmatic and constructive approach they have taken.

**5) Bursary, non-EU at FMG** Being a woman from [a low income country], it was a dream come true to finally start my PhD at UvA in 2012. I never signed any formal contract with University of Amsterdam till date but got a bursary letter from my program manager stating that I will receive a stipend for a period of four years. During my fieldwork period [abroad], I received the same amount of scholarship that I got while I lived in Amsterdam. I have no teaching commitment as I am not a contractual PhD and when it comes to supervision, fieldwork costs, and visiting conferences, I am quite satisfied and very well supported.

**5) Bursary, non-EU at FNWI.** I receive an external scholarship for the first 3 years, and during the last year I will be financed by a Dutch company in a form of collaboration. I have no contract, so I don't have an official time length of work, nor holidays. I don't have an obligation of teaching (but I wish to because it will be a good experience), but I supervise students for their bachelor's or maybe master's internship. The supervision is fine. Other support such as conference and courses are also sufficient. I can take Dutch courses from INTT which is paid by [my boss]. I feel NO differential treatment in perspective of research or other aspects, compared to my Dutch/EU UvA-employed PhD colleagues. In some cases, we are even better supported, e.g. housing. So I am very satisfied.

## **Type 6: Self financed PhD**

**6) Self-financed (Dutch, FMG).** I am an external PhD. I was very happy that I had an opportunity to do my PhD. However, since the first meeting with my supervisors, I was told that I will not receive a salary, bursary or any economic support. Maybe, with luck after my second year, there might be some funding. However, I am in my third year, and still there is no funding for me. I have a lot of trouble finding time to write my articles and doing research, because I need to have other jobs at the same time. I have gotten always the feeling that I should be grateful that UvA wants to have me as a PhD researcher, but never the respect that I am paid for my work and contribution. The first two years I have carried all my research with my own savings. But now, it is very difficult to go on, without a salary, not even mentioning the lack of respect to be a professional staff paid by the university. In summary, that is the way I feel and sometimes, due to the various jobs I have apart from my research, it is very difficult.

**6) Self financed (Dutch, FGW).** I receive no salary/ bursary or anything else in terms of money, so I'm working parttime with two jobs ... It's difficult situation to stay focused on my research and make enough progress. On the other hand, I'm glad that I have the opportunity to start with the research. My supervision is excellent. ... We should also as external PhD's have the right to make use of facilities such as a working space. I have arranged it for myself unofficially, [but] there is no overall policy on this matter. What bothers me, lastly, is the idea that external (non-funded) PhD students are expected to finish their research after 4 years.

**6) Self financed, (Dutch, FMG)** I started as a PhD candidate in 2012. .... Since I do the PhD part-time, I have an agreement that the trajectory will take longer than usual: about 6 years. This agreement has been communicated to me verbally and confirmed in e-mails. I am not paid by..., but get to use facilities such as the library and flex-workspaces, and I get satisfactory supervision. The [...] has also provided financial support for attending conferences. I have no teaching responsibilities. My

employer at my other part-time job has in the past allowed me a few hours a week of paid leave to work on the PhD, since the topic of the PhD is relevant to that job. I have also taken an extended period of unpaid leave to work on the PhD, and funded this myself.

**6, Self-financed, non-EU, FMG.** I (suppose I) am a second year PhD student, though I have not had to submit an 8th month paper (unlike all other PhD's here), and I have never signed any formal document related to my PhD status. I was asked by my former advisor if I would like to continue on to the PhD. After deliberating for 6 months, I decided to write a proposal. My agreement with my advisor was that (s)he couldn't find the money to pay me as a PhD student, but could find money to fund my research costs, as long as I completed all of my fieldwork before 2016. I would not have to pay tuition, but would have to work to pay my bills. (S)he could not guarantee a job, but I submitted my name to the person in my department who assigns teaching and assistant positions, but since I don't have a contract, most of these positions go to PhD students who are already paid contractually and therefore the department wouldn't have to pay extra to have me (an external PhD candidate?) teach.

I'm currently doing some work for the University. This is a non-renewable contract so as soon as it ends, I must find another job and apply, yet again, for another visa. Because my visa is dependent upon 'scientific researcher' status, I can only be employed by academic and research institutions, limiting my options for work. I'm doing various research and teaching jobs, working around 35 or so hours between the two jobs, and then use the rest of my personal time to work on my PhD. Of course my PhD work itself is suffering because of this, but I am also happy to have the opportunity to be a PhD candidate. That said, I have no idea of what things I need to do in order to graduate other than write my monograph. I have a flex desk and I borrowed a laptop (they won't give me one of my own, unlike all other PhD's in my department).

## **Type 7: Externally funded PhD.**

**7) FGW, Dutch,** I am a PhD candidate with a 0.8 fte position at an external research-only institute. I have no teaching obligations, but.... also no opportunities to gain this experience within the institute. [...] I hoped that I could receive a 0.2 fte contract for teaching, similar to my colleagues who are employed by the Faculty of Humanities of the UvA. I was informed, however, that as an external PhD candidate I did not have the same rights as internal employed candidates for teaching compensation. [...] In principle, I am happy with the facilities that the UvA provides me with - such as training and supervision - but in this respect I just felt very left alone. I do understand the financial situation makes this all very difficult, the main thing I minded was that there was no clear information on what rights or duties my employment constellation entails as far as the UvA is concerned, which led to a quite frustrating few weeks of mailing many people and never getting a clear answer. Also, as an external candidate I often feel I am just \*supposed\* to know things even though there are no formal ways for me to really understand the relationships between the [different parties/institutes] involved

I also learned that the Faculty of Humanities does not keep a register of all their PhD candidates, so it seems that if the FGW PhD council organized an event for all PhD candidates to help everyone understand their rights, they would not even be able to contact the external candidates.

## Appendix B: Number of PhD Types per faculty

#PhD's	Contract	Bursary	External
AISSR	120	61	68
Psych.			
FNWI			
FEB			
FRG			
FGw			