

Rethinking PhD Supervision: A PostdocNL Perspective on the “Profkip” Debate

The Young Academy has just released a statement arguing that some (senior) academics supervise so many PhD candidates (“Profkippen”) that this undermines the quality of supervision. Evidence from Dutch universities shows that many PhD candidates share supervisors with large numbers of others or receive very limited contact time, which negatively affects their well-being and PhD trajectory. The Young Academy argues that this problem is driven by an almost exclusive access to the promotierecht (right to promote) by full professors, limiting opportunities for assistant and associate professors and creating inequalities in the Dutch academic system. As one potential solution, The Young Academy proposes introducing a “limes promovendi”: a reasonable cap on the number of PhD candidates one person can supervise at any given time. By doing so, The Young Academy argues, PhD candidates would be distributed across more supervisors to increase supervision quality.

PostdocNL welcomes the public debate initiated by The Young Academy regarding supervision quality and the distribution of PhD candidates across supervisors in the Dutch academic system. The quality of doctoral supervision is central to research integrity, academic development, and the well-being of PhD candidates. While we recognise the concerns that motivate introducing a “limes promovendi”, we do not believe that a fixed numerical limit will adequately address the structural issues underlying supervision quality.

Why this matters to Postdocs

Postdoctoral researchers play a substantial role in PhD supervision. In many research groups, postdocs act as daily supervisors, providing intellectual guidance, methodological input, and continuity in projects. In some cases, they serve as formal co-promotors; in many others, their supervisory contributions remain informal but essential.

Given this central involvement of postdoctoral researchers in doctoral training, PostdocNL considers it important to contribute to this discussion. We aim to bring the perspective of postdoctoral researchers into the debate and want to explain why we do not consider a numerical cap on supervision to be the best instrument for addressing the challenges in supervision quality.

PhD guidance and supervision are a team effort

As The Young Academy outlines, PhD supervision is a team effort, and is not delivered by the promotor alone. While The Young Academy focuses on academics providing supervision, we would also like to highlight that technical, administrative, and managerial staff, scientific programmers, and other non-academic team members, contribute substantially to the day-to-day guidance of PhD candidates. Good supervision requires the attention and complementary work of the full team which should also be acknowledged as such.

The Young Academy further highlights that early- to mid-career researchers have limited opportunities to supervise. From the perspective of postdoctoral researchers, the challenge is

often different: many early-career academics already supervise extensively, but this work is not consistently recognised, formally embedded, or rewarded within institutional structures.

The same limit, different realities

The Young Academy correctly notes that supervision capacity is influenced by a supervisor's other responsibilities. For this reason, a fixed *limes promovendi* may not address differences in actual availability. A uniform cap would apply equally to academics with substantial management, teaching, or clinical duties and to those with fewer additional tasks.

As a result, the number of PhD candidates per supervisor may become more equal, while the time available for supervision may remain unequal.

Time invested does not automatically translate into impact

The discussion currently focuses strongly on the number of contact hours between supervisors and PhD candidates. However, supervision quality also depends on the substance of these interactions. The clarity of feedback, intellectual engagement, and timeliness of guidance are as important as frequency of meetings.

No one-size-fits all

PhD candidates differ in experience, independence, project structure, and support needs. Supervision requirements therefore vary across trajectories. A fixed numerical cap applies a uniform standard to diverse situations and may limit flexibility in tailoring supervision to individual cases.

Supervisory quality and responsibility

Redistributing PhD candidates across a larger number of supervisors does not, in itself, ensure improved supervision quality. At the same time, supervisory competence is not determined by academic rank. Experienced and highly capable supervisors can be found at different career stages, just as supervision challenges can occur at any level.

Since the aim is to strengthen supervision quality, the focus should therefore be on standards, preparation, and accountability for all supervisors. Expanding the *ius promovendi* or broadening supervisory eligibility without parallel attention to quality safeguards risks shifting formal responsibility without addressing the underlying issue.

Improving supervision requires appropriate training, and meaningful evaluation mechanisms for anyone who supervises PhD candidates.

Rethinking the supervision landscape

PostdocNL argues that improving supervision quality requires structural alignment between how supervision is organised in practice and how it is formally regulated, recognized, and funded. We would like to see a shift towards recognising *supervision teams* rather than focusing exclusively on a single promotor, thereby explicitly acknowledging the significant supervisory role of postdoctoral researchers and other, non-academic staff. Embedding team-based

supervision more explicitly in regulations - with clear role definitions and shared responsibility - would better acknowledge how PhD training is actually delivered.

In alignment with The Young Academy, we also see that the funding models currently reinforce the individual focus by attaching PhD positions to a single principal investigator. Allocating resources to supervision teams rather than to one designated promotor could support a more balanced distribution of responsibility and recognition.

Addressing these structural dimensions may contribute more directly to supervision quality than regulating the number of PhD candidates per individual supervisor.

Looking beyond

Finally, we believe this discussion should be broadened to include the overall scale of PhD training in the Netherlands and the career prospects available after PhD graduation. Over the past years, the number of PhD candidates and postdoctoral researchers in the Netherlands has continued to increase, while the availability of permanent academic positions has declined. At the same time, there is uncertainty whether there are enough positions available for academics outside of academia. In this context, supervision quality cannot be considered in isolation from the wider system in which PhD candidates are trained. A meaningful debate on supervision must therefore also ask whether the current volume and organisation of PhD training is sustainable in the long term.