

Go / No Go assessment - introduction and explanations

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Introduction

The Faculty of Social Sciences at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam assesses a candidate's quality, performance, and project progress in the first year of the trajectory. The candidate submits the materials for this "Go / No Go assessment" (GNG) eight months after the start of the project (when the candidate does not work full-time on the dissertation research the due date is accordingly later).

Four parties play a role in the GNG procedure: the candidate and the supervisory team, the reviewers of a research proposal and/or draft chapter (in short, 'GNG product'), the head of department, and the director and staff of the Graduate School of Social Sciences (GSSS).

Here we describe the procedure. Details on the GNG product to be submitted follow below. The procedure starts in a meeting between the candidate and the supervisory team, which is part of the usual supervision and coaching. The candidate has the choice of the GNG product, i.e. a full research proposal or a short proposal and a draft chapter that will be part of the dissertation. It is in the interest of the candidate and the project that the initial time plan (submitted for the GSSS admission) is carefully adjusted in order to fit with the remainder of the project. The design of the research must be in line with current ethical standards; therefore an ethics review and a data management plan are required to pass the GNG assessment.

In the interest of the candidate, the GSSS requests that the supervisors explicitly approve the GNG product and the research activities of the candidate before the candidate submits the GNG product. This approval is part of the application form for the GNG assessment (see below). The PhD candidate and the supervisory team discuss whether the project can be successfully continued and, if there is any doubt, what obstacles need to be removed.

There are various conditions that need to be met before starting the review:

1. Monitoring, coaching and supervision of the PhD trajectory have been adequate. If this is not the case, it is unfair to both the candidate and the evaluators to start the review of the GNG product;
2. The GNG product has been made predominantly in the first phase of the PhD research (i.e., for example, not as thesis for a MSc educational program) and is supervised by the current supervisors;
3. The supervisors have the explicit opinion that the submitted research proposal is a sufficient basis for the PhD research, and that the draft chapter is of sufficient quality to be included in the dissertation.
4. A revision of the GNG product is not necessary if the GNG product has already been assessed (for example, when a draft chapter has already been submitted to a journal and good reviews have been received). In case of doubt about the procedure, the supervisors and the candidate consult with the GSSS staff.

If supervisors find the quality insufficient or for other reasons have no confidence in good completion within the agreed time, the project is terminated. The forthcoming assessment of the GNG product only makes sense if the candidate and the supervisors wish to continue the PhD project. Starting a GNG procedure (including asking for external reviews of the GNG product) is then undesirable: supervisors have an independent judgment. If there are indications that the negative opinion of the supervisors came about in, for example, a context of insufficient supervision or a difference of opinion on scientific aspects of the research, the project will not be terminated (yet)

and the candidate can however request a review of the GNG product. In that case, it will also be considered whether the supervision structure needs to be revised.

If the GNG product is not submitted at the submission deadline, the question is whether the project should be continued, and a motivated request from the supervisors and the candidate for a later / postponed submission date is required. At a minimum, the request shall indicate the causes of the delay, and how the delay can be made up in the course of the project so that the project can be completed within the agreed time. For the latter, an updated time schedule shall also be provided. If the candidate is an employee with a one-year contract, the HRM department should be involved in the decision. The delay is registered by the GS.

The candidate and the supervisory team jointly decide on the proposed reviewers and propose five names. They have a PhD, are active scientists, have sufficient expertise about the candidate's conducted research, preferably have experience supervising PhD candidates, and are not involved in the candidate's research. Three of them are not affiliated with the faculty (external reviewers), two of them are from the faculty (internal reviewers). Those who have recently left the faculty are counted as internal reviewers. The GSSS approaches the potential reviewers.¹

The GSSS director oversees the GNG product and the other parts of the GNG. She or he decides on the acceptability of the GNG product to be submitted to the reviewers based on the above outlined criteria and on the extensiveness and scope of the assessment procedure. If there are doubts, the director consults the head of department.

The reviewers are asked to take into account that a research proposal is of sufficient quality to prepare for successful PhD research within the time limit (usually about 5000 hours are left to carry out the research and write the dissertation). A chapter has sufficient quality to be included in the final dissertation as it is or with (small) revisions. FSS does not require a dissertation chapter to be (peer reviewed) published in an edited volume or a scientific journal. In rare cases it may be decided not to include GNG product in the dissertation.

After receiving the reviews, the GSSS director informs the candidate and the supervisors, the reviewers, HRM and the head of department and concludes whether a revision of the GNG product and a response to the concerns of the reviewers is necessary. The aim of the assessment is to improve the quality of work and the project as a whole. A reviewer may advise to reject the GNG product, but the possibility of such an advice should not replace the supervisors' assessment of the feasibility in the first phase of the GNG procedure, i.e. before the review is started. In the event that one or more reviewers advise that the GNG product should be rejected, or there is strong criticism of the GNG product, the head of department and the GSSS director jointly decide on the procedure to be followed. They consult with the supervisors and the candidate, and consider how the criticism should be understood and what suggestions the candidate and supervisors have for meeting the criticism. Supervisors, the head of department and the GSSS director try to reach a joint decision on the desirability of continuing the project, taking into account the interests of the candidate.

Components of the Go / No Go assessment (see also the form and the specifications below):

1. Cover sheet
2. GNG product
3. Suggestions for three external and two FSS reviewers of the GNG product
4. (Updated) time schedule including milestones (one of these is the GNG)

¹ The GSSS approaches three external reviewers and one of the two internal reviewers. If a suggested internal reviewer has already been approached recently, he or she is not approached. If no internal reviewer has been suggested or is not considered, internal consultation takes place within the GSSS to find alternatives. External reviewers have been asked in advance by the supervisors and have agreed that they will write the review. A sample invitational letter is available in the Appendix. If the reviewer has received the GNG product and does not respond, the GSSS contacts the supervisors. The supervisors approach the reviewer again or suggest a fourth reviewer. Usually after receiving three reviews, feedback is given to the candidate and the supervisors. Sometimes, however, two reviews suffice if the reviews are extensive.

5. (Updated) budget plan
6. Data management plan
7. Availability of data and other materials
8. Ethics test of research
9. Authorship - compliance with rules for the research
10. Plagiarism check of GNG product
11. (Updated) plan for doctorate training
12. Statement of the supervisors that the candidate and the project are in good standing
13. 'Annual' consultation between candidate and supervisors
14. Delayed submission of GNG product
15. Finally: Do you have suggestions

The candidate submits all the required components (the full cover sheet and all requested documents) by email to the GSSS (graduate.school.fsw@vu.nl) with a copy carbon to the supervisors acknowledging their approval, and to the head of department. A cover letter in the mail is not necessary.

Part 2. GNG product

The GNG product is the core of the GNG assessment. It consists of either a full research proposal, or a (revised) brief research proposal combined with a draft chapter of the PhD thesis. In case of the latter, the brief proposal gives the context in which the draft chapter is embedded.

The GNG product has been approved by the supervisors, and in case of a draft dissertation chapter, (conditionally) accepted by the supervisors as chapter.

The GNG product has been made predominantly in the first phase of the PhD research (i.e., for example, not as thesis for a MSc educational program) and is supervised by the current supervisors. Please report any deviations from these requirements on the cover sheet.

Please use font Calibri 11 points, Arial 11 points or Times Roman 12 points all over. Avoid fancy layout (colors, bold, italic). Double spacing is required. Use a text and referencing style like APA 6th edition consistently (an overview is available at owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/).

Save documents with the name as specified at the Cover Sheet.

Contents of the full or brief research proposal

1. Name of PhD candidate
2. Title of research proposal
3. Number of words in 'description of the proposed research'
4. Abstract (max. 250 words)
5. Description of the proposed research
Please use subheadings like
 - a. Introduction
 - b. Research topic
 - c. Research questions
 - d. Theoretical framework
 - e. Approach (including description of data to be collected or analyzed; method of processing the data)Use between 6,000 and 8,000 words for a full research proposal, between 1,500 and 2,000 words for a brief research proposal, excluding references, including footnotes.
6. Literature references (about 30 references as a guideline)
7. Involvement of (co-)financing organizations
8. Time plan (Note: this might be similar to Part 4, but it is necessary for the review of the proposal)
9. Embedding within research group
10. Expected scientific output and dissemination of results
11. Scientific relevance (max. 250 words)
12. Societal relevance (max. 250 words)

Contents of a dissertation chapter

There is no upper or lower limit to the number of words. However, the number should not exceed the limit that is set for the publication (e.g. the journal article or the chapter in an edited volume) when it is intended to submit the dissertation chapter for publication.

1. Title
2. Authors
3. Affiliations
4. Author Contributions (specify: who did what)

5. Funding and Acknowledgments
6. Conflict of Interest
7. Number of words in main text (i.e., excluding abstract, references, tables and figures)
8. Abstract (max. 250 words)
9. Main text (e.g. subdivided in introduction, method, results, discussion)
10. References
11. Tables
12. Figures

Reviewer instructions to assess the research proposal

Please see <https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/more-about/the-graduate-school-of-social-sciences> > Assessments during your PhD trajectory > VU-GSSS Go No Go assessment - form for reviewers (fill-in document).docx

Part 4. Time schedule and setting milestones

The time schedule consists of milestones defined within the PhD trajectory and the date set for the milestone. To assess milestones, ask advice from your supervisors and fellow PhD candidates. We suggest to create up to eight milestones for the whole trajectory, for example on:

- full research proposal;
- chapter in your dissertation;
- published article or chapter;
- data collected / field work conducted;
- manuscript dissertation.

On this date the *work is completed and approved by the supervisors*. Approval by the supervisors means, for example, that a chapter (as it is or with minor revisions) is accepted for the dissertation, an article is submitted to a journal, the manuscript is ready to be submitted to the thesis committee, or that data collection is conducted according to plan. Note that a chapter, in particular when written in the beginning of the PhD trajectory, may need reworking or updating in the final phase of the dissertation process. Furthermore, an article submitted to a journal in most cases needs to be re-vised (it might be resubmitted or submitted to another journal after rejection). Time spend on re-submission should be calculated in. Conducting doctorate training, as well as teaching, also require substantial time. In such periods there is less time for research activities and the calendar time between milestones should hence be extended.

Please find below a set of tables, derived from an Excel-file that is available from the GS-website, which provide due dates for a varying number of milestones, and is specific for various types of PhD trajectories. You may want to use or consult these as a guideline; please feel free to adapt these to your project. In the examples below the period between milestones for research is set as a constant. Each stage takes the same amount of time, for example about 700 hours of work in case of eight milestones. However, the length of a period varies in the number of months due to coursework and training (concentrated in the first three years) and teaching (in the second and third year), and due to rounding off the number of months. Again, feel free to create your own time plan. By changing the starting date in the Excel file the dates for your milestones can be easily computed.

starting date	1-9-2021			
type PhD trajectory	4 year fulltime			
Go / No Go assessment	1-5-2022			
end labor contract #1	1-9-2022			
number of milestones	8	7	6	5
milestone 1	1-3-2022	1-4-2022	1-5-2022	1-5-2022
milestone 2	1-9-2022	1-11-2022	1-2-2023	1-5-2023
milestone 3	1-4-2023	1-7-2023	1-11-2023	1-4-2024
milestone 4	1-11-2023	1-3-2024	1-8-2024	1-2-2025
milestone 5	1-6-2024	1-10-2024	1-3-2025	1-9-2025
milestone 6	1-12-2024	1-4-2025	1-9-2025	
milestone 7	1-5-2025	1-9-2025		
milestone 8	1-9-2025			

type PhD trajectory	5.7 year 3.5 days/week			
Go / No Go assessment	1-8-2022			
end labor contract #1	1-2-2023			
number of milestones	8	7	6	5
milestone 1	1-6-2022	1-8-2022	1-8-2022	1-8-2022
milestone 2	1-5-2023	1-8-2023	1-12-2023	1-6-2024
milestone 3	1-3-2024	1-8-2024	1-1-2025	1-7-2025
milestone 4	1-1-2025	1-5-2025	1-11-2025	1-7-2026
milestone 5	1-8-2025	1-2-2026	1-9-2026	1-6-2027
milestone 6	1-4-2026	1-10-2026	1-6-2027	
milestone 7	1-11-2026	1-6-2027		
milestone 8	1-6-2027			

type PhD trajectory	5 year 4 days/week			
Go / No Go assessment	1-7-2022			
end labor contract #1	1-12-2022			
number of milestones	8	7	6	5
milestone 1	1-5-2022	1-6-2022	1-7-2022	1-7-2022
milestone 2	1-1-2023	1-3-2023	1-7-2023	1-11-2023
milestone 3	1-10-2023	1-1-2024	1-6-2024	1-12-2024
milestone 4	1-6-2024	1-11-2024	1-3-2025	1-10-2025
milestone 5	1-1-2025	1-6-2025	1-12-2025	1-8-2026
milestone 6	1-8-2025	1-1-2026	1-8-2026	
milestone 7	1-2-2026	1-8-2026		
milestone 8	1-8-2026			

Part 6. Data management plan

Most PhD research is empirical research, based on data. Data is essential in socio-scientific research. To the extent that conclusions in socio-scientific research rely on data, data must be diligently collected and must be traceable for those who wish to verify these conclusions. Data also has an important documentation function: data that is collected in the present can prove to be of great value to future research (provided the data has been carefully managed and documented).

A data management plan outlines how data are to be handled both during a research project, and after the project is completed. The data management plan is specific for a method or design of research. PhD research may include various methods and designs. In such a case it is not necessary that at the time of this assessment the data management plan covers all research to be conducted; it is sufficient when the data management plan for the first research is described.

Please visit <https://vu.nl/en/employee/social-sciences-getting-started/data-management-fss> for directions, questions and advice on data management.

Making a Data management plan is part of the GSSS course 'Writing a Data Management Plan' (formerly it was included in 'Research Integrity and Responsible Scholarship'). Participants create a plan and receive feedback, prior to a final assessment by the teacher.

Part 8. Ethics test of research

FSS asks researchers to conduct a self-check prior to the start of the research. This check is documented in a pdf-file. The outcome of the self-check may indicate that a full review has to be conducted by the FSS Research Ethics Review Committee (RERC). Only research project leaders can submit research for an ethics review. The PhD candidate asks her or his supervisor to submit an application for review. Apply for the ethics review procedure in time: at least three months before you start collecting data!

When the PhD research consist of various data collections, the ethics test of research has to be conducted for each part. In such a case it is not necessary that at the time of the GNG assessment all ethics tests are conducted; it is sufficient when the first research is tested.

The ethics test by an external committee (e.g., the METC) may replace the FSS test.

Please visit <https://vu.nl/en/employee/social-sciences-getting-started/research-ethics-review-fss> to conduct the self-check and for further information.