



# PhD Training Plan Manual

2024-2025

Graduate School of Social Sciences  
VU Amsterdam

## Content

<b>1. Introduction to the PhD training program .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2. General structure of the program .....</b>	<b>3</b>
2.1 Content areas .....	3
2.2 Mandatory courses .....	4
2.2.1 Bridging program.....	4
2.3 Organizing your training plan .....	4
2.4 Exemptions .....	5
2.4 Keeping track of completed courses .....	6
<b>3. Courses .....</b>	<b>6</b>
3.1 Social scientific content and theory .....	6
3.2 Social scientific methodology, methods and techniques.....	7
3.3 Academic and transferrable skills .....	7
<b>4. Other VU-GSSS training and activities .....</b>	<b>7</b>
4.1 Self-organized tutorials .....	7
4.2 Seminars and lab group meetings.....	9
4.3 Conference visit and/or presentation .....	9
4.4 Science communication .....	9
<b>5. Courses offered outside VU-GSSS.....</b>	<b>10</b>
5.1 Courses offered by research master .....	11
5.2 PhD courses offered by Vrije Universiteit .....	11
5.2.1 University Teaching Qualification (UTQ/BKO) .....	11
5.3 Research institutes with course-sharing agreements.....	12
5.4 Other research institutes .....	12
5.5 (Inter)national summer schools .....	12
5.6 Online training.....	13

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*Questions?* Email [graduate.school.fsw@vu.nl](mailto:graduate.school.fsw@vu.nl)

## 1. Introduction to the PhD training program

The VU-GSSS PhD program is designed to support PhD candidates linked to the departments of the VU Faculty of Social Sciences in their project progress and individual development. The courses are designed to enhance the academic knowledge and skill development of PhD candidates, not only to enable successful completion of their PhD project, but also to prepare them for an academic or other career thereafter. The program is tailored to serve the needs of PhD candidates at different stages of their project, regardless of their topic or methodological approach.

To stimulate careful planning at the start of each PhD trajectory, PhD candidates and their supervisors are required to design and submit a trajectory plan within the first months of their project within Hora Finita (so-called *registration*). An individual training plan for the entire trajectory is part of this. A minimum of 30 European Credits (EC) of PhD training is required for all PhDs, as specified in the VU [Doctorate Regulations](#).

The training plan may vary per individual candidate depending on discipline, prior training, personal interest, and the requirements of the candidate's research project. As a general rule, the training plan should be designed such that PhD candidates develop their knowledge, expertise, and skills in three areas: 1) content & theory, 2) methods & techniques, and 3) academic & transferrable skills. The 30 EC should be distributed equally across the three areas. The PhD candidates are advised to concentrate their course work in the first two years of their PhD project and thus limit the course work in the final year(s). PhDs should obtain 10 EC in the first year of their trajectory.

**Important:** PhD candidates must use the Training Plan Template on our website when designing the training plan. The PhD candidate discusses the proposed training plan in a meeting with the GS Program Director before submitting the final version in Hora Finita. Please email the Program Director, [programdirector.gs.fsw@vu.nl](mailto:programdirector.gs.fsw@vu.nl), to schedule a meeting in due time before the deadline of your Hora Finita registration.

## 2. General structure of the program

### 2.1 Content areas

The courses in the program center around one of three main fundamental content areas (there might be overlaps). These areas are:

- **1: Social scientific content & theory.** These courses aim to support PhD candidates to assess and build theories and obtain relevant social scientific knowledge at a doctoral educational level both within and beyond the boundaries of their own discipline.

- **2: Social scientific methodology, methods & techniques.** These courses focus on research design and methodology and provide hands-on experience with advanced methods of analysis.
- **3: Academic & transferrable skills.** The focus in these courses is on the development of academic and transferable skills, aimed at improving the necessary skills for current and future practice as an academically educated researcher.

In addition to following courses, PhD candidates can arrange individual or small group tutorials and seminar series focusing on a specialized theoretical, methodological or skills-based topic (more information in sections 4.1 and 4.2).

## 2.2 Mandatory courses

The following courses are **mandatory** to take in the first year of the PhD trajectory, ideally before the Go/No Go:

PhD Induction program (including Project Management workshop)	0.5 EC
Research Integrity and Responsible Scholarship	2 EC
Writing a Data Management Plan	1 EC (mandatory before Go/No Go)

It is also mandatory for PhDs to attend at least **one scientific conference** during their trajectory (more information in section 4.3).

### 2.2.1 Bridging program

For some incoming PhD candidates (in particular international students or those with a very different academic background), it can be useful to follow the [Bridging Program](#) organized by the International Office. The Bridging Program is an intensive three-week course intended to strengthen the research, academic, and soft skills of first-year PhD candidates, and ease their transition into the PhD trajectory.

This training counts for 6 EC. For PhDs following the bridging program, more than 30 EC for the full training plan are usually needed.

## 2.3 Organizing your training plan

Individual training plans vary between PhD candidates depending on their prior education and methodological differences in their research projects. As a supplement to the courses offered by the VU-GSSS, the training plan can also include courses organized by other graduate schools and research institutes, given that they are at least research master's or PhD level. The courses must also be relevant to the PhD project. The relevance will be evaluated by the Program Director.

The Graduate School will inform PhD candidates about upcoming courses and seminars by email and on our [website](#) (News and Events → Course Updates). We will also try to keep you posted on relevant courses offered by other institutions. VU-GSSS PhDs can follow many courses at other VU faculties free of charge. Find an [overview of all VU PhD courses here](#). PhDs can also follow courses free of charge at [Zeppelin University](#) and [AISSR](#) (UvA), thanks to a course-sharing agreement.

Section 5 lists a variety of courses offered outside the VU-GSSS, including those offered at other graduate schools and research institutes within or outside the VU. It should be noted that the list is not exhaustive. There are many interesting alternatives, which also depend on your specific needs, background, project, and discipline. PhDs are encouraged to search for relevant courses themselves. PhDs can also reach out to [graduate.school.fsw@vu.nl](mailto:graduate.school.fsw@vu.nl) for advice.

Please note that adaptations to the training plan might be necessary throughout the PhD trajectory. As your research direction crystallizes, a need for different expertise might become apparent. In addition, education programs, including the VU-GSSS training program, may change over time, with courses added, adjusted, or removed. This means that a course a PhD has in their training plan might no longer be offered at the time when they intended to follow it. It is important to remain aware of this and search for and discuss substitutions in a timely manner. You can contact the Program Director, [programdirector.gs.fsw@vu.nl](mailto:programdirector.gs.fsw@vu.nl), to discuss your revised training plan.

## 2.4 Exemptions

Depending on previous experience, PhDs may be eligible for a training exemption. If you have completed a 120 EC Master's program in the Social Sciences, you can apply for an exemption of a maximum of 20 EC. If you have 12 months or more relevant research-related and demonstrable work experience, you can apply for an exemption of a maximum of 10 EC. If you have 6 months of relevant experience, you can apply for a partial exemption of 4 EC. The relevance is evaluated by the Program Director.

Please email [programdirector.gs.fsw@vu.nl](mailto:programdirector.gs.fsw@vu.nl) to apply for an exemption. Include the following documents:

- A list of courses (or relevant work experience) that you aim to get an exemption for, and which area of the training plan they fit into (theory/methods/skills)
- Course manuals of the courses you aim to get an exemption for, alternatively a list of reports and presentations demonstrating your relevant research-related working experience
- An hour calculation using the [GSSS converter](#) (if the number of EC is not clear)

**Important:** An exemption must be approved by the Program Director and noted in the training plan at the beginning of the trajectory.

## 2.4 Keeping track of completed courses

It is the responsibility of the PhD to keep track of completed courses/activities in Hora Finita. [Instructions can be found here](#). The registered EC will be reviewed and approved by the GS. You will receive an email once an activity has been approved. Note that the approval by a supervisor does not mean that the EC have been officially approved.

For courses outside VU-GSSS, certificates of attendance must be uploaded. If the certificate does not mention EC/time investment, additional information such as a syllabus and an [EC calculation](#) is requested as well. For conference attendance, please upload proof of attending/presenting, such as an email confirmation.

Note that the GS does not grant EC for all activity categories that exist in Hora Finita. Furthermore, all activities must be pre-approved. If courses/activities are not in your approved training plan, please reach out to the Program Managers before taking part in the activity to confirm that you can be granted EC for it.

VU-GSSS grants EC for:

- Courses and workshops (on research master's or PhD level)
- Summer/winter schools
- BKO/UTQ training
- Self-organized tutorials
- Science blogging
- Conference attendance (max. 2 EC)

VU-GSSS does not grant EC for:

- Thesis supervision and teaching
- Organizational tasks
- Hosting events/conferences/lectures
- Participation in a writing week/retreat

## 3. Courses

Find below an overview of the courses offered in the VU-GSSS training program. The exact schedule varies. You can find the dates for upcoming courses on [our website](#).

### 3.1 Social scientific content and theory

Advanced Theory Construction	4-6 EC*
Decolonization and Beyond	6 EC
Key Thinkers in Social Sciences	2-3 EC*
Proposal Design & Writing	3 EC

## 3.2 Social scientific methodology, methods and techniques

Selected Qualitative Methods	4 EC
Selected Quantitative Methods	3 EC
Analysing Qualitative Data	2-3 EC*
Doing Biographical Research	3-4 EC*
Finding Typologies in Data	3 EC
Mastering Content Analysis (atlas.ti)	1 EC
The Quality of Doing Qualitative Research	3 EC

## 3.3 Academic and transferrable skills

PhD Induction program (including Project Management workshop)	0.5 EC, <i>mandatory</i>
Research Integrity and Responsible Scholarship	2 EC, <i>mandatory</i>
Writing a Data Management Plan	1 EC, <i>mandatory</i>
Writing Academic English	3 EC
Attractive Academic Writing**	3 EC
Presenting in Academic English	1 EC
How to Publish and Write Journal Articles	1 EC (0.5 EC/module)
Minto: Reporting Data and Writing Instructions	1.5 EC
Rise & Shine: Present your Academic Research	1 EC
Successful Grant Writing	1 EC

\* Note that some courses vary in EC because of the possibility of gaining extra EC by handing in an assignment.

\*\* Note that having followed Writing Academic English is a requirement for taking Attractive Academic Writing, and that you must have completed two chapters (articles) of your dissertation to be admitted. You can only follow one writing course per year.

## 4. Other VU-GSSS training and activities

### 4.1 Self-organized tutorials

**Credits:** max. 3 EC per tutorial

**Tutorials** can be organized by individual PhD candidates or small groups of up to five participants if no course on the desired topic is included in the VU-GSSS training program. Tutorials focus on a specialized theoretical or methodological topic or skill and allow PhD candidates to profit from the expertise of faculty researchers other than their supervisors. The content is variable and depends on the research interests and

needs of the PhD candidate, as well as the input of the proposed available professor. The tutorial may encompass training in designing a particular type of quantitative or qualitative study, using an advanced method of analysis, or conducting and writing a literature review on a specific disciplinary topic. Given the small set-up, tutorials are usually highly interactive and hands-on. They can be organized throughout the PhD trajectory and are thus highly flexible both concerning timing and content.

The participating group should be broader than just one supervisor and their PhD candidates; the goal is to allow PhD candidates to profit from the expertise of other faculty researchers or invited guests, other than their own supervisor.

Tutors will receive compensation for teaching a tutorial. Preference is given to internal faculty members. If the expertise needed is only found outside the faculty, an external tutor might be eligible.

### **Organization**

To organize a tutorial, participating PhD candidates (together with the tutor) must submit a plan beforehand, and after the activity report who completed it. The tutorial needs to be designed in close collaboration with the proposed tutor/faculty member and in consultation with the Program Director. The final plan should be submitted for approval at least one week before the start of the tutorial by email to the Program Director ([programdirector.gs.fsw@vu.nl](mailto:programdirector.gs.fsw@vu.nl)) and the GS ([graduate.school.fsw@vu.nl](mailto:graduate.school.fsw@vu.nl)). The tutorial can only start after approval by the Program Director. The tutor is paid after the tutorial has been completed. Consult the Program Managers for further details.

Other PhD candidates will be invited by the tutorial organizer and/or the GS. The GS can assist with practical matters, such as room booking.

The tutorial plan should include:

- 1) Name and details of faculty member and PhD participants
- 2) Course objectives
- 3) Schedule
- 4) Readings
- 5) Assignments and assessment
- 6) Detailed calculation of EC

1 EC is equivalent to 28 hours of work. The study load is based on different parts of the tutorial: readings (number of pages to read), the number and size of assignments completed outside the meetings, and the number and duration of meetings. Use the following standards to compute the study load for each part, or use [this Excel](#) to make the calculation:

- Meetings: 1,5 hour-meeting = 2 hours study load (preparation included)
- Readings: reading 6 pages of scientific literature = 1 hour study load
- Assignments: writing a paper = 2 hours study load per page (line spacing 1.5)



## 4.2 Seminars and lab group meetings

**Credits:** 1-2 EC (max. 2 EC per PhD trajectory)

**Seminar series and lab group meetings** are self-organized series of meetings supervised by faculty staff. It can be a series of regular meetings in a broader research group in which participants discuss papers (of guest speakers or participants' own work), methods, or other topics related to a research theme. It can also be an intensive meeting series of a few days, for instance with (international) guests.

### Organization

To receive credits for seminar series/lab group meetings, participating PhD candidates (together with a faculty member) must submit a plan for the seminar beforehand, and an attendance list (showing who completed the seminar series and corresponding activities) afterwards. The plan should be designed with the faculty member chairing the meetings and in consultation with the Program Director. The final plan should be submitted for approval at least one week before the start of the seminar series by email to the Program Director ([programdirector.gs.fsw@vu.nl](mailto:programdirector.gs.fsw@vu.nl)) and the GS ([graduate.school.fsw@vu.nl](mailto:graduate.school.fsw@vu.nl)).

The GS can assist with practical matters, such as room booking.

The seminar plan should include:

- 1) Name and details of faculty member and PhD participants
- 2) Description/objectives of the seminar series/lab group meetings
- 3) Schedule
- 4) Calculation of EC

1 EC is equivalent to 28 hours of work. 1 EC would equal joining 5 sessions of 2 hours (including preparation) as well as an individual presentation during one of these seminars. You can calculate the time investment using [this Excel](#).

## 4.3 Conference visit and/or presentation

**Credits:** max. 2 EC in total (1 EC for attending, 1 EC for presenting)

PhD candidates are required to attend at least one large (2 days or more) scientific conference during their trajectory. PhD candidates can obtain 1 EC for attendance only, and 2 EC for an oral or poster presentation. Attending more than one conference is welcomed, but you will not receive additional EC.

## 4.4 Science communication

**Credits:** 1-2 EC

Science communication means making scientific knowledge accessible to the wider public and as such contributes to the valorization of your research. The valorization of scientific knowledge becomes increasingly important, and as such is a relevant skill for PhDs to master. We stimulate practicing with science communication by granting 1-2 ECs for the produced items.

There are many forms of science communication, writing blogs and popular articles (for instance in newspapers) being the most common examples. Writing blogs or popular articles\* allows PhD candidates to publish in an informal manner at an early point in their PhD trajectories, and to practice writing by explaining scientific research to a broader audience. It also allows both individual PhD candidates and the faculty to build a reputation of expertise on particular topics.

There is a vast array of channels to publish this, including:

- <https://www.socialevraagstukken.nl/>
- <https://standplaatswereld.nl/about/>
- LinkedIn articles ([example by previous PhD](#))
- FSW research labs
  - o [The Resilience, Security & Civil Unrest \(ReSCU\) Lab](#)

When a PhD candidate has published the required number of items to obtain EC, they submit an overview of the contributions in a Word document (with titles and links to published blogs) by email to the Program Director ([programdirector.gs.fsw@vu.nl](mailto:programdirector.gs.fsw@vu.nl)) and the GS ([graduate.school.fsw@vu.nl](mailto:graduate.school.fsw@vu.nl)) to apply for the credits.

For a standard item (+/- 1000 words) we estimate a workload of 9 hours (6 hours of writing, 3 hours of preparation such as reading literature or attending a seminar). Given that 1 EC corresponds to 28 hours of work, PhDs must produce 3 items to be granted 1 EC, and 6 items to be granted 2 EC (max. 2 EC per trajectory).

*\* We will also consider other forms of communication such as podcasts, it is important that the product is traceable and related to your research.*

## 5. Courses offered outside VU-GSSS

PhD candidates are encouraged to attend courses offered outside the VU-GSSS training program, given they are at least Research Master's or PhD level. These may be courses and workshops offered at other VU faculties, at VU interfaculty research institutes, or other universities/research schools in the Netherlands and abroad. Following external courses can be particularly appropriate when they offer specialized content that is not covered within the VU-GSSS program, or when they are organized in a more convenient time period for the PhD candidate. Furthermore, some PhD projects are

closely linked to a disciplinary research school outside VU-GSSS, which justifies following (part of) the education program offered there.

When following courses outside the VU-GSSS, make sure to get a certificate confirming your attendance and the number of EC earned. Please upload this certificate to Hora Finita as proof of attendance when entering the credits. If credits are not specified for a course, PhD candidates can request VU-GSSS to judge the content of the course to specify whether, and how many, credits can be awarded. The PhD will need to provide a detailed program/syllabus including contact hours, readings, and assignments. To ensure you can earn EC by following an external course, please consult the Program Director before taking it.

## 5.1 Courses offered by research master

VU-GSSS collaborates with the [Social Sciences for a Digital Society](#), which means that PhDs enrolled in the VU-GSSS can follow courses organized by the program. The Spring edition of the Research Integrity and Responsible Scholarship course is organized by the research master. Other courses that PhDs commonly follow include:

- Communicating Science
- Writing a Research Proposal (Spring edition)
- Various (advanced) methods courses

Register for research master courses by emailing [graduate.school.fsw@vu.nl](mailto:graduate.school.fsw@vu.nl).

## 5.2 PhD courses offered by Vrije Universiteit

Training for PhD candidates offered by other faculties at the VU is open to every PhD candidate of VU Amsterdam. Admission requirements may be set for specific courses, and in rare cases there is a fee involved. Find all PhD courses at the VU [in this overview](#) (updated regularly). The GSSS has a special course-sharing agreement with the VU Amsterdam Business Research Institute ([ABRI](#)). GSSS PhDs regularly follow courses at ABRI, and the other way around.

One course that might be particularly relevant to follow at a different faculty is the Writing a Data Management Plan course. Since this course is only held once a year by the GSSS and is mandatory before the Go/No Go moment, PhDs are encouraged to follow this course at a different faculty if the dates of the GSSS course do not fit.

### 5.2.1 University Teaching Qualification (UTQ/BKO)

The VU Center for Teaching & Learning offers training to obtain the [University Teaching Qualification](#) (UTQ/BKO) several times every year. This training is particularly relevant for PhDs who will be teaching throughout their PhD trajectory, or plan on doing so after finishing their PhD. In the training, PhDs will learn how to apply active learning techniques, supervise students and design their own courses.

The UTQ is recognized by all Dutch universities. The training counts for 5-6 EC in your training plan.

### 5.3 Research institutes with course-sharing agreements

VU-GSSS aims to facilitate linking PhD candidates to suitable research schools, relevant courses, and other scientific researchers, both in national and international contexts.

We have an agreement for exchange of course participation free of charge with:

- Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research ([UVA-AISSR](#))
- Zeppelin University ([ZU](#)) - max 5 courses

This means that PhD candidates enrolled in the VU-GSSS can participate without a fee in most of the courses offered by these graduate schools. Their course programs and information about how to sign up can be found on their websites.

### 5.4 Other research institutes

For research institutes/graduate schools beyond the ones the GSSS has course-sharing agreements with (VU, AISSR, ZU), course participation usually comes with a fee. Note that you can apply for the Graduate Fund to cover (75% of) fees.

The following research schools offer PhD courses and are regularly attended by VU-GSSS PhDs. Courses at these research schools are (in most cases) accepted for the training plan.

- Research School for International Development ([CERES](#))
- Kurt Lewin Institute ([KLI](#))
- Netherlands Institute of Government ([NIG](#))
- Netherlands School of Communication Research ([NeSCoR](#))
- Netherlands Research School of Gender Studies ([NOG](#))
- Netherlands School of Anthropology ([NESA](#))

Some departments have course-sharing agreements with research institutes listed above. Check with your department about possibilities for taking part free of charge.

### 5.5 (Inter)national summer schools

There are many universities and research institutes in the Netherlands and abroad that offer summer courses on social sciences topics and methods. Find recommendations below. Relevant summer school courses are (in most cases) accepted for the training plan. A participation fee is usually required. Note that you can apply for the Graduate Fund to cover fees.

- [Essex Summer School on Social Science Data Analysis](#) (UK)

- [ECPR Summer Schools](#), on various topics in different European cities
- [ICPSR Summer Program in Quantitative Methods](#) (US)
- [Lugano Summer School on Social Science Methods](#) (Switzerland)
- [Barcelona Summer School of Demography](#) (Spain)
- [VU Amsterdam Summer School](#) offers three blocks of 2 weeks topical and methodological courses in July and August, some of which are at PhD level
- [Utrecht Summer School](#)
- [UvA Summer School](#)
- [University of Groningen Summer School](#)

## 5.6 Online training

Some EDX, MOOC, and Coursera courses can be useful for your project and might be accepted for your training plan. Note that the course also needs to be at least Research Master's or PhD level. You must buy the certificate to gain EC. Consult the Program Director before you decide to follow an online course as part of your training plan/to gain EC.