UNIVERSITEIT TWENTE.

To the Executive Board

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date	19 March 2025 **final version 26.3.25**	e-mail	g.w.m.oldeengberink@utwente.nl
subject	Twente Graduate School budget and 'annual plan' 2025		

Dear Executive Board,

 In this cycle, the University Council (UC) initiated discussions on the Twente Graduate School (TGS). As a first step, we received the TGS budget and annual plan 2025 and held a preliminary discussion with Dean Ariana Need to gain some initial insights. Additionally, we engaged in discussions with Tom Veldkamp to further explore key aspects of TGS operations and concerns.

The primary goal of this letter is to convey the queries and concerns raised by many of the core research staff (PhDs, EngDs and daily supervisors) at UT as conveyed to UC members. The UC takes these concerns, combines them with the inferences drawn from the UC's discussions with Ariana Need and summarizes them in this letter.

The discussion on TGS in this cycle was relatively brief. The UC appreciates the Executive Board (EB) for the opportunity to begin this dialogue and is committed to continuing the discussion in the upcoming cycles. The UC finds it important to ensure that the concerns of the research staff at UT are thoroughly addressed and a more comprehensive exchange regarding TGS in future cycles will help achieve this. In the following sections, the UC summarizes the core concerns conveyed to the UC by UT research staff, primarily, by PhDs, EngDs and daily supervisors and intends to use the points in this letter as a template for future discussions.

Finances

The budget is detailed on Page 5 of the budget and annual report TGS. What remains unclear is which tasks are performed by about 12 fte based on this budget of €1.7 million. During the discussion with Ariana Need, it was noted that TGS operates solely based on the budget allotted to it. The UC's discussion with Ariana Need revealed that the primary tasks of TGS all fall within the domain of monitoring. Therefore, the UC wishes to know the average cost of monitoring a PhD and an EngD candidate. Additionally, the UC would like to ask if these costs can be framed within the lens of any available cost-management matrix, for example, the MoSCoW prioritization matrix, to achieve further insight into the significance of the monitoring activities.

Additionally, if the majority of TGS' tasks are along the lines of monitoring an educational program, then the UC wishes to have a discussion regarding the advantages and disadvantages

of integrating TGS into a service department like CES. This includes exploring the rationale for either pursuing or rejecting such an integration.

PE-NUT

PE-NUT is the association of all early-career researchers at UT. For many years, P-NUT as an organization has faced difficulties in receiving support from UT. A notable example in the past has been the lack of a home base. It is important to note that the specific concern of a home base was discussed in the previous cycle and is now being looked into by the rector magnificus Tom Veldkamp and we thank him for that. However, the UC's concern is broader and motivated by the extensive correspondence and significant bureaucracy experienced by PE-NUT in the home base topic. It is seen that study associations at UT typically have a parent organization, often their faculty, that provides support in areas such as,administration, logistics and finances. Therefore, the UC wishes to explore the potential benefits and drawbacks of TGS becoming the parent organization of P-NUT. It is important to note that such support from a central organization is extremely beneficial and even crucial for PE-NUT, which is an association for early career researchers.

Courses

Many concerns have been raised regarding the low course efficiency i.e. 'new knowledge gained vs. time spent on the course' and similar concerns are found in the 2023 Annual education report. The UC believes that it may be very valuable to have a discussion regarding the benefits of identifying appropriate target groups for these courses. The feedback shared with the UC is that early career researchers acquire knowledge regarding academic soft skills such as making posters or presentations in a decentralized 'on-the-job' manner from fellow academics in their research group. The UC therefore wishes to understand what the unique selling points and learning impact of TGS courses are on the average PhD candidate or EngD candidate and how these can be enhanced.

Course Exemptions

While TGS offers the option for candidates to apply for exemptions, two concerns regarding this have been conveyed to UC members. The first concern is that many promoters, daily supervisors, PhDs and EngDs seem to be unaware of the exemption option. Currently, this information is presented in the TGS Guidelines and is communicated by Ariana Need during the introductory course. However, feedback shared with the UC is that it would be effective to communicate the option of applying for an exemption actively and regularly with all individuals involved in the PhD and EngD trajectory.

The second concern shared with the UC is that the process of applying for an exemption is felt to be an extremely difficult and bureaucratic process and is said to often result in a negative outcome i.e. a denial of exemption. The research staff feels that this process should be made easier, both to reduce the workload on both research and TGS staff as well as to not deter legitimate cases from applying for an exemption. The UC shares these concerns.

Therefore, we request TGS to analyze the process of applying for an exemption and explore ways to make it leaner.

Lastly, the UC wishes to touch upon a broader concern. During the discussion with Ariana Need, it was suggested that it may be beneficial to investigate a framework wherein candidates show that they have acquired certain skills during their research trajectory rather than interrupting their research trajectory (think context switch) to take a special course. The UC believes that such a framework can avoid creating a culture that coddles early career researchers but rightfully exposes them to the challenges of academic life. This approach would allow them to acquire and present evidence of their skills at their own pace.

Bottleneck PhD defenses

A critical concern that has been shared with the UC is the significant bottleneck in PhD defenses. The causes for this seem to primarily be infrastructural in nature i.e. number of beadles and rooms. The UC believes that these two infrastructural aspects should not be a barrier to schedule a defense moment for the candidate, especially when from a content-perspective, the candidate has been approved to defend. The UC requests TGS to investigate options to increase the number beadles as well as to use UT's extensive campus infrastructure and create more room options.

Regarding rooms, during the discussion with Ariana Need it was mentioned that there is a backup room for defences in Vrijhof. The UC would like to know under which circumstances the Vrijhof room is made available for defences. Additionally, the UC feels that information regarding the possible use of the Vrijhof room as a defence room should be more actively communicated to candidates, promoters and supervisors.

The UC strongly believes that is important to ensure that a defence date can be scheduled at any point in the calendar year, except for public holidays. The only obstacle to this should be a content-based hindrance from the candidate's side but not an infrastructural hindrance. The UC believes that it is important to reinforce a culture of finishing the PhD in four years as the norm and considers the defence an integral part of the job. As the situation is now, the candidate has a waiting period of about 6 months between asking for a date and the actual defence. Besides, the candidate can only ask for a date when the draft thesis is almost complete. That means that there is at least a period of 9 months in which the candidate cannot do any research anymore, which is a considerable part of a PhD period of 4 years. Therefore, it is beneficial, for all parties involved, that, once the candidate is approved for a defence, the candidate is able to setup schedule a defence date as early as possible within the contract period, with multiple date and room options to choose from.

Culture of trust and individual accountability

On a broader level, the UC believes it is more beneficial for TGS's monitoring to be lightweight and focused on essential aspects. Each PhD/EngD is unique, and a one-size-fits-all approach to monitoring can be ineffective and can lead to more bureaucracy and frustration.

This frustration can translate into disengagement and a lack of responsibility, which in turn results in a need for increasing verification.

From discussions with Ariana Need and Tom Veldkamp, it was noted that the need for increasing verification is felt because some supervisors are not fulfilling their roles of supervision and accurate monitoring. The UC feels that is it important to incentivize accountability at the individual level and to create an accountability framework that monitors how effectively managers of a PhD/EngD trajectory are fulfilling their assigned roles. Such a framework would allow the managerial individual to retain their supervision role as long as they regularly meet the required standards. The UC believes that, especially in the long-term there is significant value in incentivizing a culture of individual accountability. Therefore, the UC requests TGS and Tom Veldkamp to investigating the nature of such an accountability framework.

The UC believes that an essential role that TGS can undertake in the research trajectory is to balance the power dynamic between the candidate and the promoter and supervisors. For example, establishing quantifiable and [SMART](#) exit requirements for the PhD research work could be used to ensure the appropriate end of a PhD trajectory, protecting the candidate from undue demands as well as the research group from extra work or low-quality work respectively. Quantifiable exit qualification would empower candidates to argue for the right to a defense once they have completed said requirements and prevent supervisors from delaying progress with unnecessary tasks as 'just write another paper'. The UC feels that ensuring that the research trajectory is fair and ethically satisfactory is a crucial role for TGS, especially given its neutral position in the relationship between a supervisor and their candidate.

Lastly, the UC commends TGS's efforts in recognizing the need to build a new in-house monitoring system and recommends that the aforementioned philosophies of an accountability framework for research managers and light-weight monitoring of an ethically satisfactory research trajectory be embedded in the monitoring system itself. The monitoring system could also have automatic in-built checks, for example, checking if an actual thesis (.pdf) is uploaded prior to receiving a defense date. The UC believes that this approach can aid in keeping bureaucracy to a minimum, maintaining the processes transparent while also reducing the workload for TGS staff.

An example of where support for PhDs was lacking is during the S&T re-organization. From the many concerns shared with the UC, it is clear that during the S&T re-organization PhDs received no or little support in terms of guidance or clarity regarding future steps. The UC feels that TGS could have played an important role in such a case. Even if TGS had been instructed to send the PhD candidates back to S&T, TGS could have stepped in to offer support when they became aware that there was not enough assistance available from the S&T colleagues.

In general, the UC believes, that while prior to the re-organization, TGS cannot know about which specific PhDs or which supervisors are affected by the reorganization due to privacy concerns, it is important that once the reorganization process has been 'completed', TGS can provide a listening ear and actively offer support and closely monitor the progress of the affected PhD candidates. The UC feels that TGS could ensure that PhDs affected by such negative circumstances are reached quicker with the right information and receive appropriate guidance, given that TGS is fully aware of the minimum requirements for a quality PhD trajectory.

Working together with early-career researchers

An important feedback shared with the UC, is that in addition to input received from the Doctorate Board, consisting of the Deans as well as Tom Veldkamp, it would be extremely beneficial to incorporate regular input from 'ground-level' researchers such as PhDs, EngDs, Post-Docs and daily supervisors. Given that ground-level researchers are often the ones who are directly affected by TGS's processes, it would be valuable for TGS to have a format that allows for regular input and evaluations from those researchers.

It seems that the current way TGS operates and provides support is causing growing frustration among ground-level researchers across UT, making the situation unsustainable. TGS staff are even receiving hate mail, which is unacceptable and a clear sign for things to change before tensions escalate. The existence of TGS during a time of extreme layoffs is also contributing to significant frustration. The UC is concerned that this increasing frustration will not translate into better adherence to work processes but rather will lead to additional workload and stress for TGS staff.

The UC believes that creating a format to collect regular constructive input, like a 'sounding board', could be beneficial for TGS as well as for the research staff at the UT. This would allow TGS to receive more concrete and actionable feedback, while ensuring that the research staff at the UT also feels heard in the process of PhD/EngD monitoring.

In conclusion, the UC requests the EB to consider these concerns as communicated by the research community of the UT. The UC recommends to the EB that, given the additional work and discussions required on this topic, TGS be revisited in future cycles.

UNSOLICITED ADVICE:
The University Council,

has seen:
- the budget and 'annual plan' 2025 Twente Graduate School (TGS);

has heard:
- the meeting with Dean of TGS, Ariana Need on March 10th, 2025;
- the meeting with Rector Magnificus Tom Veldkamp on March 12th, 2025;

and advises:
From Finances section:
- to estimate the average costs of PhD and EngD monitoring as well as other costs and relate these costs to the budget needed to perform their tasks;
- to explore the feasibility of integrating TGS into a service department like CES, including the rationale for either pursuing or rejecting such an integration;

From P-NUT section:
- to discuss the potential advantages of TGS becoming the parent organization of P-NUT;

From courses section:
- to analyse the unique selling point and learning impact of TGS courses on the average PhD candidate or EngD candidate and how this can be improved;

From Courses Exemption sections:
- to communicate the option of applying for an exemption actively and regularly with all positions involved in the PhD and EngD trajectory;
- to analyze the process of applying for an exemption and investigate ways to make it leaner;
- to investigate a framework wherein candidates demonstrate the acquisition of skills during their research trajectory while causing minimal context switches from the research trajectory;

From Bottleneck PhD defences section:
- to explore options to allow more beadles as well as leveraging UT's extensive campus infrastructure to create more room options;
- to explore the circumstances under which the Vrijhof room can be used for defences and to actively communicate the same to candidates, promoters and supervisors;

From Culture of trust and individual accountability section:
- to create an accountability framework that objectively moderates how well managers of a PhD/EngD trajectory are fulfilling their assigned roles and possibly incentivizes individual accountability;
- to investigate ways to balance the power-dynamics in a PhD/EngD association and to ensure a fair and ethical research trajectory e.g. SMART requirements of a PhD/EngD trajectory;
- to embed the philosophy of lightweight and decentralized monitoring and the resulting concrete procedures into the upcoming monitoring system MyPhD/MyEngD;
- to play a greater role in supporting early career researchers in their research trajectory, especially in times of distress;

From working together with early-career researchers:
- to investigate the creation of a 'sounding board' consisting of ground-level researchers (PhDs, EngDs, Post-Docs and daily supervisors) or regular users of TGS's monitoring facilities to gain actionable and constructive feedback;
- to engage in discussions regarding TGS in the next cycle.

Yours sincerely,
On behalf of the University Council,

dr ir H. Wormeester
Chair