

Consultation on the proposed directive on teaching assistance by doctoral candidates at EPFL – LEX 4.4.4

PolyDoc appreciated the open exchange which took place on the TA situation with the PhD students where that was done: at the beginning of FATAL, during the different CDoct meetings where it was discussed, and in some of the doctoral schools, and faculty councils.

The proposed framework increases clarity and fairness regarding the TA contribution of doctoral students at EPFL. It does so while ensuring sufficient teaching assistance for EPFL's education mission and protecting doctoral students by setting a maximum. However, we are concerned about the possibility that some PhD students do not find sufficient teaching opportunities, as the exact needs of each section have not been evaluated.

Through the rest of this position paper, we will state the different points which we feel are missing or could be strengthened in this LEX proposal.

Averaging the TA contribution over the duration of the PhD

We agree with the idea of averaging the load over the four years of the PhD so that the doctoral candidate has the opportunity to teach less when they arrive and once they start writing their thesis. However, we do think that asking PhD students to fulfill the same TA duty when asking for an extension beyond the initial four years would be unfavorable for both PhD students and PIs.

Indeed, time spent beyond four years is stressful for PhD students as they would generally be amid writing their thesis. The teaching load would hinder their ability to get their thesis written, even more so if that extension is unexpected. On top of that, finding the funds for an extension can be a hurdle for the PI. Considering the potential difficulty and administrative overhead of finding funds for the TA contribution only contributes to making the situation harder. A lack of available TA funding denying a PhD student a required extension is a scenario that must be avoided.

Our proposal would therefore be to modify Article 2.1 in order to explicitly average the TA load over the 4 first years of the PhD and then relax the TA load for extensions from 0% to 20% of overall working time, instead of the proposed 10% to 20% over the whole duration of the PhD.

Furthermore, there are situations where a portion of the duration of the PhD should not be counted towards the required TA contribution: industry internship, PhD exchange, etc. These cases should be treated with flexibility, in order to avoid situations where teaching assistance becomes an unnecessary administrative burden.

Fairness and counting time spent teaching

Unifying the TA time requirement within a section is a step towards more fairness within TA load, rather than leaving it to the policies of each individual lab. However, some situations may still lead to unfairness if the timetable set by a section is strict. For example, the labs of two courses attached to the same section may necessitate vastly different preparation times, despite Annex II fixing a unified preparation time for both.

Also, some TA-related tasks are either missing or hard to classify in the given categories. The task of creating course content is for example missing from Annex II, but so might be the creation of a website, the organization of the semester projects proposed by a lab, the leading of seminar-like discussions in class, etc. Trying to list each and every possible TA-related task is not feasible.

Thus, Article 2.3 should be modified to give the possibility to be flexible in the accounting of these TA hours with respect to the section-specific table in Annex I, upon a motivated request.

This also paves the way to deduct from the TA contribution other tasks that doctoral students may perform for the school, such as outreach, science communication, representation, etc.

Sections should also regularly report to EDOC on the TA workload of their affiliated PhD students to ensure intra and cross-section fairness in TA load.

European funding issues

Leaving the responsibility of finding funds to labs for PhD students under grants that do not allow it penalizes the obtention of prestigious, mainly European, grants. This is in dissonance with EPFL's mission of excellence in research, as well as in opposition to the encouragement to seek funding outside Switzerland given the Swiss research funding cuts situation.

Finding sufficient TA workload

It remains unclear that there will be sufficient teaching assistance workload for doctoral students as the section needs in question are, to the best of our knowledge, unassessed. What is certain, though, is that the already present difficulties to find TA roles to fill for doctoral students of some sections will only increase.

Thus, Article 2 should be modified to explicitly allow taking TA positions to fill in a section other than one's own. Beside the LEX, it should be made as easy as possible to find TA roles to fill, including in sections other than one's own.

Teaching quality

TA roles create meaningful pedagogical experience for PhD students. Giving feedback and recognizing this work, as suggested in Article 4.4, is highly beneficial for everyone involved. However, there remains an uncertainty about the way the assessment of the teaching quality of a TA is conducted, and the consequences of a bad assessment.

*Being poorly assessed at face-to-face teaching must **not** mean, in any case, termination of the doctoral contract.*

Travel time from associate campuses and from workplaces outside EPFL

Half of the travel time is counted within the TA contribution. As this time was not necessarily counted in the past, this is a net improvement. Nonetheless, the situation may still be unfair for doctoral students working in associate campuses, as they are effectively encouraged to work while commuting, which can greatly hinder efficiency.

This is even worse for doctoral students who are employed outside of EPFL and for whom no travel time is counted within the TA contribution. *In light of the financial and logistical difficulties, our proposal would be to count half their travel time within their TA contribution, and if their travel time is superior to 90 minutes, then these students should not have to TA.*

We hope that with this letter we could explain our view and concerns on the proposed TA LEX changes. We are open to more in depth discussions if there are any unclarities.