

PhD Guide

November 2025 Edition

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1. Aims of the PhD Guide

Dear Reader,

This guide is for you if you want to know more about doctoral training at EPFL. You will find an outline of the PhD curriculum with its formal requirements, suggestions for good practice and information about how doctoral training is governed at EPFL.

To the *impatient reader* we recommend the sections on the formal academic framework: [overview of the PhD curriculum](#), [first year requirements](#), [annual report](#), [steps to graduation](#).

If you are a new PhD candidate¹ (PhD student): welcome! This is the start of an exciting journey of scientific discovery and profound personal transformation.

If you are a new thesis director² (PhD supervisor): welcome! We hope this guide helps you nurture the next generation of researchers in your field.

The chapters cover the following topics:

- [Chapter 2](#) will guide you step-by-step through the different phases of the PhD,
- [Chapter 3](#) explains aspects of being employed as a doctoral assistant at EPFL,
- [Chapter 4](#) provides helpful information on life as PhD candidate and available support,
- [Chapter 5](#) presents the organisation of the Doctoral School at EPFL.

This guide is issued by the EPFL Doctoral School – the institutional entity that brings together all doctoral programs under one roof – and therefore focuses on the general rules and principles that apply to PhD candidates in all doctoral programs. If you have questions about a specific situation, please [contact](#) the administration of your doctoral program.

We hope you enjoy this guide and wish you success,

Philip Mair, PhD

Deputy to the Associate Vice President for Doctoral and Lifelong Education

¹ In EPFL regulations, a PhD student is referred to as PhD candidate or as doctoral assistant.

² In EPFL regulations, a PhD supervisor/advisor is referred to as thesis director.

2. The PhD at EPFL

The doctorate at EPFL is a journey of scientific discovery during which the PhD candidate will experience profound personal and professional development as they learn how to conduct research at an advanced level. During this journey every PhD candidate will experience highs and lows. The key to success is to keep focused on the goal. The desired outcome is two-fold: the PhD graduate, as a fully competent researcher, and their thesis, standing as evidence of having contributed to knowledge through original research. The general PhD requirements are defined by the [Swiss Higher Education Framework](#) (which refers to the [European Higher Education Area framework](#)). The PhD is a qualification of the third cycle and is awarded to students who:

- have demonstrated a systematic understanding of a field of study and mastery of the skills and methods of research associated with that field;
- have demonstrated the ability to conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research with scholarly integrity;
- have made a contribution through original research that extends the frontier of knowledge by developing a substantial body of work, some of which merits national or international refereed publication;
- are capable of critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis of new and complex ideas;
- can communicate with their peers, the larger scholarly community and with society in general about their areas of expertise;
- can be expected to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement in a knowledge-based society.

These requirements are summarized succinctly in the *Ordinance on the doctorate conferred by the EPFL*, art. 2 para. 1: “EPFL confers the title of Doctor of Sciences (*dr ès sc* or PhD), which attests that the holder has submitted a personal and original piece of scientific research work, has successfully completed a program of doctoral study (Art. 3, para. 3) and is consequently qualified to engage in high-level scientific research work.”

One could rephrase the above as becoming a qualified researcher by doing research, similar to an apprenticeship. The master-apprentice model is indeed the historic precedent of the student-supervisor relationship. This is still the foundational relationship today. Yet, the modern doctorate also significantly differs from the historic precursor. Research in most disciplines has moved from an individual activity to working in teams; far more people are studying and doing research today; multi-, inter- and trans-disciplinary research has become important; and societal expectations towards

researchers have increased with the rise of the knowledge-based economy.

Taken together, these developments mean PhD candidates become competent researchers not only by learning from their academic supervisor but also by learning from senior team members and peers. They need to take ownership of their own development by attending courses and trainings. They need to learn to collaborate within and beyond their discipline, anticipate the impact of their research as well as prepare for their career in an economy driven by knowledge creation and innovation.

For a new PhD candidate looking ahead all this may be both exciting and intimidating. However, it is an encouraging thought that one or two EPFL PhD candidates pass their final exam *every day* marking the end of an exciting journey of scientific discovery.

Academic framework

Doctoral programs

Every EPFL PhD candidate must be matriculated in a PhD program. The PhD programs are responsible for tracking the progress of each PhD candidate from admission to graduation. They organize doctoral courses and bring together their scientific community by organizing events. The key reference person for a PhD candidate in regards to their doctorate is the administrator of their PhD program who is there to support them and answer their questions.

Thesis director

The thesis director is the academic supervisor of the PhD candidate. The thesis director guides the PhD candidate in their work and ensures that the thesis progresses smoothly. Every PhD candidate must have a primary thesis director who is an EPFL professor or a senior scientist (*Maître d'enseignement et de recherche*) with the explicit right to supervise PhD theses.

Thesis co-director

In addition to the primary thesis director, one thesis co-director may be appointed. Thesis co-directors participate in all academic assessments. They are named in the thesis and on the PhD diploma. The minimal requirement for a thesis co-director is that they hold a doctorate and are actively engaged in research; they can be external from EPFL.

Mentor

Each PhD candidate chooses or is assigned to a mentor, a senior scholar, who can be contacted for independent advice for career and professional growth. This person is different from the thesis director and the thesis co-director, and their identity is not disclosed. While mentors are experienced in the supervision of PhD candidates, mentors are not involved in the supervision or decisions affecting their mentees. It is generally not recommended and in some PhD programs forbidden that the mentor participates in any exam of the mentee. This allows mentors to offer independent academic advice.

Academic fees

EPFL does not charge annual tuition fees for PhD candidates. Instead, PhD candidates are employed as doctoral assistants and earn a salary (see the following section).

There are two one-off fees: one at the start to enroll for the doctorate and one at the end to register for the oral examination.

- The registration fee due upon enrollment in the doctoral program is CHF 150.- for students with a master's degree (or equivalent) of a foreign university, CHF 50.- for students with a master's degree of a Swiss university, and none for students with a master's degree of EPFL or ETH Zurich.
- The oral examination fee is CHF 1'500.- and must be paid before the oral examination.

Employment framework

Employment during the PhD

The PhD candidate is employed in the unit of their thesis director from matriculation to at least the oral examination as a doctoral assistant. Therefore, PhD candidates are paid a monthly salary and have both student and employee status at EPFL. Their workplace is one of the EPFL campuses (Lausanne, Geneva, Sion, Neuchatel, Fribourg), for more details see [Chapter 3](#).

Off-Site doctorates

A PhD thesis may be prepared partly or entirely outside EPFL, including the possibility of external employment at a host institution, under certain conditions and given approval by the PhD program director. In all cases, an EPFL thesis director must take responsibility for the thesis and the academic

quality standards of EPFL apply. As mentioned above, a thesis co-director from the host institution may be appointed provided they meet the minimal requirements. Prospective PhD candidate interested in such an arrangement should contact the administration of the most relevant PhD program for further details.

Contributing as a teaching assistant

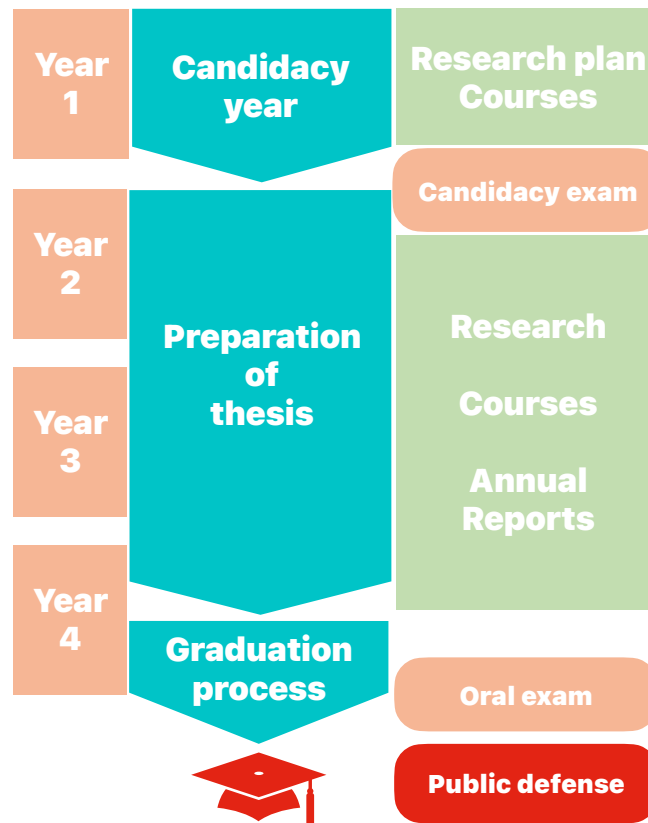
As part of their employment duties, PhD candidates are expected to contribute to bachelor and master courses as teaching assistants (TAs). These courses are coordinated by the teaching sections that set the rules for their TAs, such as the type of teaching activities and minimum contribution required. PhD candidates are assigned to the section of their thesis director.

Overview of the PhD curriculum

All doctoral training takes place in the framework of a doctoral program. Prospective PhD candidates must be accepted by one of the doctoral programs to matriculate for the doctorate. The doctorate is carried out under the supervision of an EPFL thesis director.

The basic curriculum is the same in all doctoral programs with a standard duration of four years. The first year represents a phase called doctoral studies, during which the PhD candidate confirms their aptitude to complete a doctorate at EPFL by meeting the [first-year requirements](#): have a thesis director, complete the first-year courses, obtain approval for a research plan, and pass the candidacy examination. Once these requirements are met, the PhD candidate is formally admitted to the preparation of the thesis. During this phase, the focus is on conducting and disseminating research as well as completing the remaining course requirements. Once per year, the PhD candidate must write a report on their progress, which is evaluated by their thesis director and submitted to the doctoral program. To complete the doctorate, each PhD candidate must successfully defend their thesis. During the private oral examination, the thesis is evaluated in depth by a jury of experts. This is followed by a public defense at the end of which the title of *docteur ès sciences* is conferred.

The PhD curriculum outlined here is defined in the Ordinance on the doctorate conferred by the EPFL ([LEX 2.4.0.1](#)), the Directive concerning doctoral studies at the EPFL ([LEX 2.4.1](#)) and the regulations of each doctoral program ([LEX 2.4.2](#)).



Getting started

It is important to establish a good relationship with the thesis director from the beginning and to understand the first-year requirements. The Doctoral School encourages PhD candidates to actively seek clarification regarding any questions that may arise. Thesis directors will help their new PhD candidates to get started, but they cannot guess all questions an individual PhD candidate might have. The administrator of the PhD program and the program director are also available to answer questions and provide clarifications.

What to expect

A PhD requires more academic independence, time management and a higher level of professionalism than Bachelor and Master studies. To adapt to this new context, the student-supervisor relationship is foundational. Different thesis directors have different supervising styles and different PhD candidates have different supervision needs. Clarifying how to work together on an individual basis is important. The basic expectations of the EPFL Doctoral School are shown in the graphic below.

Doctoral School Expectations



Thesis Director

- Define a feasible and appropriate thesis subject
- Guide scientific and professional growth (knowledge, skills, autonomy)
- Provide regular time for discussions and constructive feedback (especially in year 1)



PhD Candidate

- Commit fully to the thesis project
- Conduct research independently and develop needed skills progressively
- Respect deadlines and deliver requested information punctually

Both



- Stay flexible and adapt approaches when results differ from expectations
- Follow EPFL and broader scientific rules, standards, and ethical principles
- Respect each other, colleagues and students and appropriately interact and communicate

Establishing a good student-supervisor relationship

The thesis director (and thesis co-director, if one is appointed) and the PhD candidate will develop a close working relationship during the thesis, making it crucial to discuss expectations early. It is helpful to think of two important aspects separately: *what* the subject of the thesis is and *how* the student and supervisory team will work together. The discussion on “what” includes the overall goal of the thesis, the specific scope, timing, collaborations, training, equipment and resources. The discussion on “how” includes topics such as how to communicate, how often to meet, and what level of feedback will be provided. The question of “how” also extends to [courses](#), [research ethics](#), [disseminating research findings](#) (conferences, articles, etc.) and [teaching duties](#).

To build strong foundations, the Doctoral School recommends that the PhD candidate and thesis

director exchange early and comprehensively about the “how” questions. The two checklists included in the two references below are useful to guide the discussion.

- EPFL Doctoral School, [The supervisory relationship: a tool for discussion](#).
- Anne Lee: [Establishing a Good Relationship from the beginning](#)

Formal first-year requirements

As mentioned in the [overview](#), the first year of the PhD at EPFL is a phase called doctoral studies. By the end of the first year, each PhD candidate must: have a thesis director³; complete the first-year course requirements; have an approved research plan; have passed the candidacy examination.

The candidacy examination is considered the capstone assessment of the first year. The aim of this exam is that the PhD candidate demonstrates their aptitude to complete a PhD thesis at EPFL. The exam usually includes a presentation of the thesis subject, the research plan and results obtained during first year. This is followed by a question-and-answer session during which the jury tests the candidate’s understanding of the proposed thesis and how the research will be conducted, their broader understanding of the field, their scientific thinking and their mastery of prerequisite knowledge. If needed, a PhD candidate has the right to attempt this examination a second time.

The modalities of the candidacy examination and other first-year requirements differ between PhD programs and are defined in the respective [doctoral program regulations](#).

A list of frequently asked questions about the first year of PhD studies can be found [here](#).

Making progress in your PhD

Performing research

Conducting research is the core of a doctorate. PhD candidates are expected to explore the thesis subject through original research and to complete the thesis within the given time frame. They are expected to build on established knowledge and to explore what remains to be uncovered to deepen the understanding of a topic in their field. Being a PhD candidate means generating new knowledge and creating innovative technologies by following a structured scientific approach to formulate and

³ Note that in all PhD programs, except for Computer and Communication Sciences (EDIC) and Finance (EDFI), a PhD candidate must have a thesis director at the point of matriculation and therefore normally fulfil this condition from the beginning.

solve research questions. This differs significantly from bachelor's or master's research, which has limited scope. The community of EPFL thesis directors has written the following message to the future PhD candidate:

What do we expect of you?	What it takes
<p>A PhD candidate will learn to design, execute and interpret a well-defined research investigation and to plan the next steps. We expect that you will learn to communicate the outcome of your work clearly, addressing for each study or analysis the following points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why did you do it? (concept or hypothesis motivating the work) • How did you do it? (method, design of the model, experiment, simulation, analysis) • What did you obtain? (results: experimental data, theoretical predictions, simulations, proofs, or quantitative data analyses) • What does it mean? (the interpretation, both immediate and in the wider context) • What will you do next? (how to advance the project, refine methods, or address limitations if the approach did not succeed) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possess appropriate fundamental knowledge and know-how in your field • Become familiar with the background literature on which your project is based. • Make sure you remain aware and up to date with the new literature in your field. • Keep on top of current technical developments in your field and new techniques that can be applied to your project. • Share and present your work (individual supervision and research group meetings, institute seminars, conferences). • Submit your work to colleagues and other scientists to obtain their feedback. • Share your knowledge and expertise with colleagues, give meaningful feedback on their work, and help train others.
<p>We expect you to accurately and clearly record your research so that anyone else with proper expertise can reproduce what you did after you have left EPFL.</p> <p>Writing, presenting and defending your thesis work will require the acquisition and implementation of the above. To help you achieve these goals, your supervisor and colleagues, the PhD program, the School and EPFL will give you the opportunity and means to acquire the competencies you need to advance in your thesis. This support includes technical guidance, educational courses, interpersonal and presentation coaching, and networking opportunities to foster research and career development.</p>	

Research ethics

Every person involved in research at EPFL is responsible for their own conduct and for complying with the guidelines, directives and best practices on scientific integrity. Nonetheless, as part of their leadership duties, project and research group leaders, and especially professors, bear the final responsibility and therefore play a key role in the supervision of junior researchers.

EPFL attaches great importance to its staff and faculty members implementing best practices in their research. Respect for ethical principles in the conduct of scientific research is based on the principles of reliability, honesty, respect and accountability. These values form the basis of all scientific activity and are essential prerequisites for the credibility and acceptance of science. All EPFL researchers bear the responsibility to uphold the good reputation of the institution, respect its rules, policy and guidelines, and undertake their activities accordingly. It is thus of utmost importance that all EPFL members conduct research with the highest standards of integrity.

The guiding principles for the planning, execution, presentation and evaluation of research work at EPFL are presented in the Directive concerning research integrity and good scientific practice at EPFL ([LEX 3.3.2](#)).

Research misconduct includes fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism (the so-called FFP categorization) in proposing, performing, or reviewing research; or in reporting research results:

- Fabrication is making up data or results and recording them as if they were real.
- Falsification is manipulating research materials, equipment, images, or processes, or changing, omitting, or suppressing data or results without justification.
- Plagiarism is using other people's work or ideas without giving proper credit to the original source." (cf. [European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity](#), page 10).

Violations of scientific integrity can also take other forms. Important references are the Code of [Conduct for scientific integrity of the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences](#) (pages 22-25) and the [European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity](#) (pages 10-11).

At EPFL, research integrity implies:

1. All persons involved in EPFL research carefully archive their data.
2. No research data or results may be fabricated, altered, selected or presented in a misleading manner.
3. No one may appropriate the creation of intellectual property of others or use these inappropriately.
4. The list of authors of a scientific publication must include all the persons – and only these – who have made an essential contribution to the subject of the publication.
5. Principles, rules and regulations for research involving human beings, personal data, animals and dual-use must be respected and approvals may be required.
6. Research group leaders actively steer and supervise their research team and ensure that they observe the above principles. Research supervisors must display exemplary conduct in terms of

integrity and be aware of relevant directives and best practice.

The procedure to follow in cases of suspected scientific misconduct can be found in the Ordinance concerning the procedure to follow in cases of suspected scientific misconduct ([LEX 3.3.3](#)). PhD candidates must follow the EPFL course about scientific integrity and good scientific practice (see this [webpage](#)).

Guidance and information about ethics compliance and ethics review by competent authorities can be found on the dedicated [EPFL Research ethics webpage](#).

Doctoral courses and other training

As part of their doctorate, PhD candidates must complete the minimum number of ECTS defined in the [regulation of their PhD program](#). In general, PhD programs offer doctoral-level courses but some also accept advanced master courses. Courses can be selected from:

- [Doctoral Program Course Book](#): these courses focus on the program's core discipline; complementary areas of science and transversal skills applied to their domain.
- [Doctoral School Transversal Skills Course Book](#): these courses focus on transversal skills important for academic development and career preparation.

It is important for PhD candidates to select a balanced combination of courses in their discipline as well as transversal skills, they should not neglect one in favor of the other.

For added flexibility, each PhD candidate can freely choose 4 ECTS from amongst all the EPFL courses offered by PhD programs and the Doctoral School. PhD candidates may request the recognition of external courses (ECTS equivalence), subject to approval by the PhD program in advance.

If they find an important topic missing, PhD candidates have the opportunity to propose and organize summer schools (see [how to organize a summer school](#)). Being an organizer is a valuable learning opportunity that develops multiple transversal skills.

Many EPFL services offer additional training opportunities. While not all trainings award ECTS, they significantly support the professional development of PhD candidates. See [EPFLcareer.ch](#), [KeepLearning](#) (for staff); [teaching support](#); the [library lectures and talks](#); the [language courses](#).

Formal progress update: the annual report

PhD candidates and thesis directors are in regular exchange about the progress of the thesis. Surveys at EPFL show that they meet every two weeks on average. The frequency of meetings is higher in the first year and decreases in later years. To complement this exchange, the doctoral regulations require that progress is formally recorded in a mandatory report once per year; the first annual report is due one year after the candidacy examination. The report is completed in a dedicated [online tool](#) and coordinated by the PhD programs.

The annual report offers an opportunity to take a step back from the routine exchanges and take a big picture view of the status of the thesis. Shorter-term objectives often change weekly or monthly with new results requiring adaptation of the next steps. The annual report helps confirm or adjust the long-term objectives: if these are left to drift, there is a risk of misunderstandings arising. Thesis directors expect more autonomy as PhD candidates gain experience, and this shift in supervision style can cause doubts, therefore the annual report is also an opportunity to [revisit the “how” questions](#).

In the annual report, the thesis director will give a formal assessment of the progress:

- Exceeds expectations: the progress made during the previous year is exceptionally good; the thesis is on track; only a few PhD candidates will receive this rating during their PhD.
- Meets expectations: the progress during the previous year is good; the thesis is on track; this is the most common rating.
- Needs some improvement: the progress made during the previous year is short of expectations; the thesis can get back on track if the PhD candidate follows the feedback received; an intervention by the PhD program director is not needed; some PhD candidates may receive this rating during their PhD.
- Unsatisfactory: the progress made during the previous year was insufficient; this signals a serious risk of failure; an intervention by the PhD program director is necessary; this assessment is rare.

Unsatisfactory progress

It is an inherent risk that the knowledge or progress of a student working towards a degree is found to be unsatisfactory. Fortunately, this is a rare occurrence at doctoral level. However, sometimes a thesis director has serious concerns. The thesis director can express these concerns in the annual report or by informing the PhD program director directly. The role of the PhD program director is to understand the situation and ensure a balanced academic assessment. The process is as follows:

1. The thesis director and PhD program director discuss the situation of the PhD candidate.
2. The PhD program director notifies the PhD candidate in writing of the problems discerned, the measures required to improve the situation, and the deadline within which these must be taken. This notification may be directly included in the annual report.
3. A new assessment is made by the thesis director and the PhD program director who, if needed, may be supported by a member of the PhD program committee who is knowledgeable about the thesis subject.

As a result of this process, many PhD candidates are able to improve the situation and meet the requirements. The situation is then considered resolved. However, should the PhD candidate be unable to improve the situation, then an exclusion from the PhD program may follow. For PhD candidates employed by EPFL, their employment would then also end.

Disagreements

Establishing a good student-supervisor relationship from the beginning should prevent serious differences of opinion between the PhD candidate and thesis director. Nonetheless, this can occasionally occur. It is the role of the PhD program director to endeavor to resolve such disagreements and therefore either party can contact them for support. Should the program director be unable to resolve the situation, it may be referred to the Doctoral School and the Associate Vice President for Doctoral and Lifelong Education for resolution.

In such situations, PhD candidates can also contact their [mentor](#) for confidential advice. The mentor can offer advice on how the PhD candidate could approach the situation. PhD candidates should not hesitate to contact the mentor: this is not considered a formal step, the conversation is confidential, and no one is informed of it. The mentor will not act on behalf of the PhD candidate or be involved in any decision-making. Read about further sources of support and help [here](#).

Dissemination of research findings

The communication of research findings is a fundamental aspect of the academic process and an important element in doctoral training. PhD candidates are expected to present their work at scientific conferences and to publish scientific articles, or to disseminate their findings through other valuable means, such as filing a patent. Thesis directors are expected to support their PhD candidates in these efforts, thus introducing them to the scientific community and enabling them to benefit from the feedback of experts in the field.

Given the considerable differences across disciplines in terms of time to publication, having a fixed number of publications is not a formal criterion for graduation at EPFL. Nonetheless, publications provide significant evidence of a PhD candidate's original contribution to research and are taken into account in the overall evaluation of the PhD thesis.

See this [page](#) for publication support available at EPFL.

Open Science

EPFL prioritizes open science for the dissemination of new knowledge and advancement of the wider scientific community. Discoveries made at EPFL should be shared with the entire scientific community and the public. Furthermore, the intellectual contributions to those discoveries, as well as the corresponding intellectual property rights, should be recognized.

More information about Open Science at EPFL can be found [here](#).

Authorship

The general rule about authorship is that an author is (excerpt of [Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences guidelines](#)) *“someone who, through their own scientific work, has made a substantial contribution to a publication. (...) Authorship does not derive merely from a person's role. A purely financial contribution or position of superiority does not in itself entitle an individual to authorship.”*

In fact, many journals specify in detail what constitutes authorship, and in some cases request that the contributions of each author are clearly identified. Failing to include a contributing author on a paper is considered a scientific misconduct, and adding authors unjustified is considered unethical. See also the section on [research integrity](#).

Technology Transfer

If the research of a PhD candidate yields results that could benefit the economy and society, technology transfer is a valuable route to disseminate these findings. At EPFL, the [Technology Transfer Office](#) must be notified of research results with commercial potential and offers individual advice as well as training to researchers.

Please note that EPFL is required to publish all PhD theses in full without any permanent redactions. The PhD candidate and their thesis directors must ensure before embarking on a thesis that nothing will impede its complete publication and distribution. A delay to this can only be granted for the prompt filing of a patent (see also [here](#)).

Enhancing the PhD experience

Doing a PhD at EPFL is a unique opportunity to progress on the academic path as well as to expand horizons and interests. Preparing for a future career and building a professional network starts at the beginning of the PhD.

Career and professional development

EPFL offers a plethora of opportunities to better understand career perspectives within and outside the academic sector and to acquire the necessary skills to pursue these different paths (see [training](#)). Thesis directors are expected to support PhD candidates in strengthening their professional profiles by encouraging them to learn and practice non-technical skills, crucial for their future careers.

The Doctoral School runs a leadership training program aimed at PhD candidates interested in pursuing a career in a non-academic sector after their studies, starting in the 2nd year of PhD. For more information check the [PhD Excellence Program website](#).

Networking

PhD candidates should not underestimate the importance of building a professional network to further their career outlook. Exchanging with others can bring valuable insights from their experiences, lead to opportunities for academic collaboration and future employment, and last but not least, to the formation of friendships. EPFL, with its international outlook, offers a unique environment where international experts are present at [events every day](#).

The [Forum EPFL](#) is an annual week-long event giving companies and future graduates an opportunity to meet. Organised by EPFL students, PhD candidates are welcome to participate.

The [EPFL Memento](#) is the agenda of all events taking place on all EPFL campuses. You can subscribe to receive the events announcements of your community directly in your mailbox.

Mobility during the doctorate

A research stay abroad or an internship are interesting options to enhance a PhD candidate's experience. PhD candidates interested in such an experience should always discuss it with their thesis director.

For research stays abroad, PhD candidates funded via an SNF project may apply for in-project [mobility](#)

[grants](#). For those not funded under such a project, the Doctoral School offers support via the [EPFL Doc.Mobility](#) program.

Industry internships are also possible. They typically take place in Switzerland and, in general, the PhD candidate will take an unpaid leave of absence, as the company provides a salary during the internship. Further information is available [here](#).

Innovation and entrepreneurship

If a PhD candidate is interested in innovation and entrepreneurship, and would like to use their thesis research as the basis for a start-up, the Doctoral School offers [courses](#) to get started. Then, EPFL offers many innovation and tech-transfer programs. The [Innigrant program](#) is very popular with PhD candidates. The [EPFL Engineering Industry Day](#) is an excellent networking opportunity. For more information, see the [VPI website](#).

Finishing the PhD

The annual report at the end of the third year offers a good opportunity to plan the steps towards graduation. It may become evident in some cases that there is not enough time to complete important research goals as well as write the thesis, potentially requiring an extension. The PhD candidate and thesis director should discuss the best course of action, knowing that decisions on extension are made by the thesis director, the PhD program and the Doctoral School.

Extension of the PhD

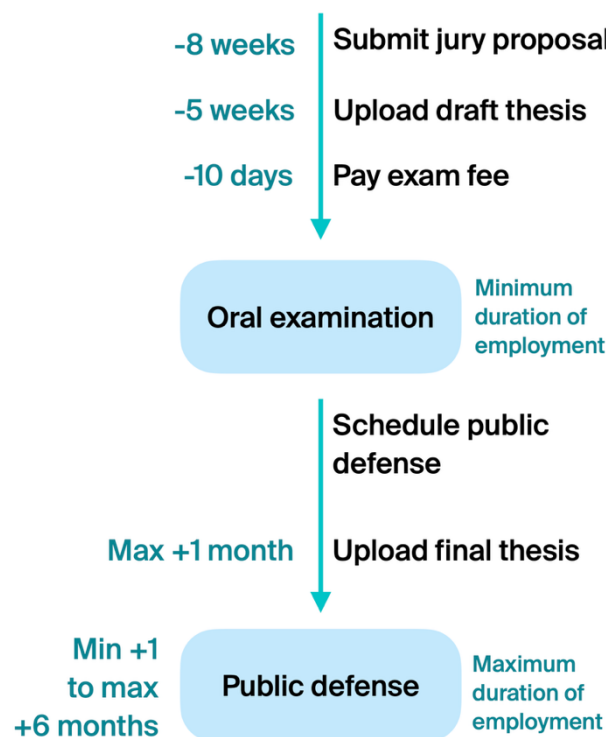
An extension of the doctorate is possible up to a maximum total duration of six years. In formal terms, an extension request is a request to postpone the deadline of the oral examination. Requests must be justified and submitted to the PhD program. They require approval from both the PhD program and the Doctoral School. They can only be granted if financial means are in place for the extension of the full-time employment contract of the PhD candidate for the whole duration of the prolongation. Please note that the People Experience/HR team can only renew or extend the employment contract once the extension request has been fully approved. It is therefore recommended to submit requests between six and three months prior to the current oral examination deadline.

Formal steps to graduation

To graduate, PhD candidates must pass a private oral examination and subsequently hold a public

defense. During the private oral examination, the thesis and the PhD candidate's mastery of the field are examined by an expert jury. The public defense fulfils a requirement of public dissemination and is a moment of celebration at the end of which the doctoral degree is conferred by the thesis director.

Please pay special attention to the timelines and formal requirements of this intense period of the doctorate. The jury proposal is due at least eight weeks prior to the proposed date of the oral examination at which time the proposed jury members, time and location of the examination must already be known.



You will find important practical information about the administrative steps towards graduation in the [FAQ End of thesis](#). The above graphic is a simplified overview, please familiarize yourself with the document "[Timeline and checklist for the oral exam and public defense](#)".

Oral examination

The oral examination is conducted by a jury composed of a jury president, the thesis director (and thesis co-director, if applicable), an internal examiner and two external examiners. Many but not all thesis directors will discuss the potential composition of the jury with their PhD candidate. Ultimately, the jury is proposed by the thesis director and program director to the Associate Vice President for

Doctoral and Lifelong Education. The PhD candidate submits the thesis manuscript in advance of the oral examination. The thesis director and examiners each write a written report on the thesis to the attention of the jury president. During the oral examination, which usually takes approximately two hours, the PhD candidate presents their thesis followed by a questions and answers session. The outcome of the oral examination can be:

- *Pass*: the jury accepts the thesis. The jury can request minor corrections that can be completed within one month. Only the thesis director has to accept the final version.
- *Conditional pass*: the jury expresses specific concerns and requests significant additional work that has an impact on the content or the form of the thesis. Based on the proposal of the jury, the candidate is given between more than one month and up to a maximum of six months to complete the required corrections. The jury and the thesis director evaluate the new version and have to accept it.
- *Fail*: the jury considers the work unsatisfactory and bringing it to an acceptable level requires a workload of more than six months. Based on the proposal of the jury, the candidate is offered a second attempt detailing the requirements.

Public defense and conferral of the degree

The public defense takes place between four weeks and six months after the oral examination. The thesis director presides over this public event during which the PhD candidate defends their thesis by making a presentation of maximum 45 minutes followed by a discussion. The doctoral degree is presented to the PhD candidate at the conclusion of the public defense.

Writing the thesis

It is important to know the deadline for the submission of the thesis manuscript well in advance: check the [timeline](#). This allows the PhD candidate to plan backwards from the goal and break tasks into manageable steps in order to stay focused on progress and sustain motivation.

Planning the writing includes that PhD candidate and thesis director agree on the timeline of when draft chapters are submitted to the thesis director for feedback and what level of feedback they will provide (key chapters may need multiple revisions). Both should adhere to the agreed timeline. PhD candidates are advised to connect chapters representing distinct subprojects by writing a strong introduction and conclusion: the failure to link subprojects into an overarching thesis and explaining the overarching implications of the whole work is a common reason for a *conditional pass*.

The [rules on citation and copyright](#) must be respected when writing the thesis. The EPFL Library

provides useful [information](#) about copyright and training for researchers. The inclusion of text excerpts or citations in a thesis without giving the proper reference is an act of plagiarism.

Finally, the writing phase may be an emotional rollercoaster. On a bad day, PhD candidates may feel overwhelmed, frustrated or doubtful of their work. Such emotions are not equivalent to failing. They are part of the process, but one needs to watch out for fatigue, procrastination, and isolation. Taking breaks, physical and social activities, sleeping and eating properly are essential throughout. [PolyDoc](#) gives useful tips for writing the thesis on their website.

Directive concerning the citing and referencing of sources of information in written work submitted by students ([LEX 1.3.3](#))

Thesis composed of published articles

In agreement with the thesis director, it is possible to submit a thesis composed of published articles: please follow carefully the guidelines detailed on [this webpage](#) (see: “What about a thesis made of published articles?”).

Public dissemination of the thesis

EPFL is required to publish the final version of the thesis accepted by the jury *in extenso*. For this, EPFL uses an electronic archiving and distribution system. The thesis director and PhD candidate sign a thesis dissemination agreement before the thesis is sent for printing. This agreement authorizes EPFL to make the thesis accessible online (see [here](#): “Oral Exam – Submission of the Final Version of the Thesis”).

Note that the only justification for delaying the public release of the thesis is the prompt filing of a patent. A request to postpone the publication of the thesis must be submitted by the thesis director and PhD candidate to the Doctoral School with a supporting statement by the Technology Transfer Office indicating the required duration of the embargo. See also [this webpage](#) (FAQ End of thesis – Publishing support).

Finishing up at EPFL and moving on

The final stage leading up to the oral examination is an intense time during which PhD candidates are deeply absorbed by their thesis and often find it difficult to plan the immediate future. There will be final thesis corrections to make; research to hand over to the next generation; materials, data and documents to archive; and accumulated vacation days to take. The period between the oral

examination and public defense offers flexibility to deal with these matters.

In terms of employment, PhD candidates must be employed at least until the oral examination. Employment is possible to continue until the public defense per agreement with the thesis director and People Experience/HR.

Continuing as a postdoctoral researcher

Following the oral examination, a transition from a PhD contract to a postdoctoral contract can be discussed with the thesis director and, if agreed, submitted for approval to People Experience/HR. This transition is only possible if the responsibilities evolve and align with those typically expected of a postdoctoral researcher. The postdoctoral contract should be for at least three months and all the vacation days linked to the PhD contract must be taken before the transition can take place. Finally, note that the total duration of employment, including both the PhD and postdoctoral contracts, must not exceed six years ([LEX 4.4.1](#)).

EPFL Alumni: your lifelong connection to EPFL

With over 47'000 alumni and alumnae across the globe, the EPFL Alumni network is a powerful community of talent, inspiration, and support – ready to accompany you during your PhD and long after graduation.

During their doctorate, PhD candidates can benefit from the EPFL Alumni Mentoring Program, designed to guide them through career decisions, training opportunities, or even the early stages of launching their own startup.

After completing their thesis, all PhD graduates officially join the EPFL Alumni community. They will receive an e-mail invitation to activate their profile on the [EPFL Alumni platform](#), where they can access the alumni directory, job offers, events registration (conferences, company visits, etc.), join interest groups, and tap into a wide range of resources. If they choose to become a contributing member, they will unlock even more benefits, including one-on-one career support, preferential rates, access to meeting rooms on campus, and a subscription to *Dimensions*, the EPFL magazine published four times a year.

To learn more, visit epflalumni.ch, or get in touch at alumni@epfl.ch. And don't forget to follow [EPFL Alumni on LinkedIn](#) to stay connected.

3. The employment status of PhD candidates

EPFL recognizes PhD candidates as both students and employees, granting them a dual status that reflects their academic and employment situation. All matters related to employment status, including employee engagement, are overseen by the [People Experience Team](#).

Below, you will find key information to help you better understand the status of employees at EPFL. To complement these details, the Vice Presidency for Human Development encourages PhD candidates to read these [webpages](#) and to not hesitate to reach out to the listed contacts (see [teams and contacts](#)) for any questions.

Employment at EPFL is governed by the Law on the Swiss Confederation personnel ([LPers](#)) and the Ordinance on the personnel of the ETH Domain ([OPers - EPF](#)), which outline the rights, responsibilities, and administrative processes applicable to all employees. The specific rules for EPFL doctoral assistants are defined in the [Directive on Terms of Employment of EPFL Assistants](#) (LEX 4.4.1). Further information for thesis directors and laboratory administrative assistants can be found in the [HR contract management process](#).

Contracts for PhD candidates

PhD candidates are employed as “doctoral assistants” on one-year fixed-term contracts, which are renewed annually until the oral examination, subject to continued satisfactory academic progress and professional conduct.

The signing of the initial employment contract, as well as subsequent renewals, is coordinated by the administrator of the unit where the PhD candidate will be employed. The employment contract can only be issued after the prospective PhD candidate has applied to a doctoral program and received written confirmation of admissibility from the program (see [PhD admission](#)).

Additionally, all foreign nationals are subject to [work permit or authorization](#) procedures, which typically take around 2 to 3 months to complete.

Each contract comes with a job description signed by both the PhD candidate and the thesis director.

Salary

EPFL provides PhD candidates with a transparent and fair compensation system based on an [official salary scale](#). Salaries are quoted in gross terms and paid in 13 installments, with the 13th salary

distributed in November and December. If a PhD candidate joins or leaves EPFL during the calendar year, the 13th salary is adjusted proportionally.

Swiss social security

Switzerland's social security system is built on three pillars, offering comprehensive protection against life's uncertainties such as old age, disability, illness, accidents and unemployment.

- 1st Pillar: Social Insurances
- 2nd Pillar: Pension Fund applicable if annual salary exceeds CHF 22'680.- (as of 2025)
- 3rd Pillar: Private and optional retirement savings

The 1st and 2nd pillars are mandatory and contributions are automatically deducted from your salary (click [here](#) for more details).

At EPFL the Pension Fund is managed by [Publica](#), the federal pension fund. Contributions split is as follows: 64% paid by the employer and 36% by the employee, covering both savings and risk components (click [here](#) for more details).

Tax deductions

For non-Swiss PhD candidates holding a B or L residence permit, income tax is automatically deducted from your salary. This simplifies administrative procedures and ensures compliance with Swiss Tax regulations (click [here](#) for more details).

Family allowance

In Switzerland, we benefit from family allowance to help compensate parents for the costs of raising their children (click [here](#) for more details).

Employment duration

The employment contract is aligned with the duration of the PhD, which has a standard length of four years. If the PhD is extended beyond four years, the employment contract must be extended for the duration corresponding to the extension and at least until the oral exam. The maximum duration is 6 years.

Work rate

The standard work rate for PhD candidates is 100%, and part-time doctorates are generally not

possible. However, the work rate may be adjusted as appropriate to specific personal situations (health, parenthood, etc...). Working part time does not give an automatic extension to the academic deadlines, and the maximum duration for the PhD remains six years. Therefore, requests should be coordinated with the doctoral program and the HR manager.

Work schedule

Work schedules are arranged by agreement between the thesis director and PhD candidates based on the principle of trust and taking into account the needs of the unit involved. The principle of flexible working hours has been adopted at EPFL. Furthermore, note that extra hours and overtime are not compensated.

Read the [Rules and Regulations](#) (LEX 4.1.4) for information related to Working Time Management.

Vacation

PhD candidates are entitled to 25 days of paid vacation per year (excluding public holidays). The yearly holiday entitlement should be taken within the same calendar year, with at least two consecutive weeks of vacation per year. Using all of the allocated holidays each year is important to rest and recover.

Before PhD candidates set holiday dates (and make reservations!), they need to discuss them with the thesis director and agree on a plan some weeks or months in advance. Holidays cannot be taken during a period chosen by the student against the will of the thesis director and, generally, it will not be possible to take a vacation during the semester because of teaching duties. In turn, the thesis director should ensure that their employees can take all their holidays during the current year.

Please note that it is mandatory to record vacations in the [Absence platform](#).

Further details on vacation and working time management are documented in the [Rules and Regulations concerning Working Time Management](#) (LEX 4.1.4).

Health insurance

It is the responsibility of the PhD candidate to obtain health insurance in accordance with Swiss law.

Accident and other insurances

With a contract at EPFL, you are automatically insured for both occupational and non-occupational

The employment status of PhD candidates

related accidents through SUVA. EPFL provides its staff members with a range of additional social insurance coverages in accordance with Swiss legal provisions and the specific regulations of the ETH Domain. For more information visit [this website](#).

Employee benefits

PhD candidates are entitled to a range of employee benefits, see the dedicated [webpage](#) for details.

4. Life as a PhD candidate

At EPFL, people from a wide range of cultural and academic backgrounds work and study together. An environment of mutual respect is necessary to allow all members of the EPFL community, individually and collectively, to achieve exceptional results.

While academic life at EPFL is full of opportunities, it can also be stressful, and motivation might fluctuate. Researchers can find it difficult to limit their working hours and take time for their personal life and leisure activities. Maintaining a healthy work-life balance is essential for both short- and long-term wellbeing and productivity. Taking [vacations](#) is important, but there is much more to it. PolyDoc provides helpful tips on the [digital guide](#) on their website.

PolyDoc and ELSA

[PolyDoc](#) is the EPFL PhD association and is part of [ELSA](#) (EPFL Scientific Staff Association). PolyDoc aims to provide a forum for dialogue with the PhD community across all PhD programs. In addition to a monthly apéro (small gathering with food and drinks, Swiss style), sports and games help to bring PhD candidates together in an informal, non-scientific setting. These are excellent opportunities to build a network beyond the limits of one's scientific field.

PolyDoc is an important channel for exchanging views and opinions among peers. The association works with PhD candidates and their representatives to develop proposals for improving the PhD experience at EPFL. PhD candidates are encouraged to discuss their problems and needs with their peers and the PolyDoc committee members during social events.

We encourage all PhD candidates to join the association's [Slack workspace](#) and [WhatsApp community](#), to stay connected with their fellow PhD candidates and get the latest updates about events on the Lausanne campus!

Sports – Associations – Spirituality

- [Sport Santé UNIL+EPFL](#) offers many indoor and outdoor sport activities, at 10' walking distance from the Lausanne campus. The membership card (semestrial or yearly) gives you access to numerous sports, renting material, classes, etc.
- The EPFL list of all [associations by category](#).
- The [spiritual care service from EPFL](#) offers multiple meetings per week such as discovery meals,

guided meditation, prayer, choir and so on.

Parenthood

Juggling responsibilities both as a PhD candidate and a parent can be a challenge! This is why EPFL is committed to providing working conditions that are compatible with parental responsibilities. For maternity leave, the salary of the PhD candidate is paid via central funds, and their contract and academic deadlines are automatically extended to compensate the 4 months of leave. Parents raising children are eligible for a [family allowance](#). Current (and future) parents can find information and support for family and work-life balance on this [website](#).

Equality – Diversity – Respect

As a publicly funded institution, EPFL is endowed with a particular responsibility, both with regards to the principle of non-discrimination and in achieving progress for effective equality and inclusiveness. Promoting equality in scientific careers is an integral part of the policy of continued excellence implemented by EPFL, where people from a wide range of cultural and academic backgrounds work and study together. EPFL encourages diversity and fosters a culture of inclusion. EPFL does not tolerate discrimination, bullying, violence or harassment, as well as any discrimination towards students and employees on grounds such as gender, sexual orientation, disability, colour of skin, social origin, religious affiliation, etc.

The [Equality Office](#) implements a wide range of actions, such as mentoring and coaching programs, workshops and training opportunities with the aim of developing networks, the sharing of experiences and raising awareness of equality issues.

Equality and Diversity

A key topic for EPFL is the active pursuit of advancements in gender balance in all areas of research, education and administration, as highlighted in:

- [The ETH Domain's Strategy](#) for Diversity, Equality and Inclusion, and
- [The Equal Opportunities Action Plan](#)

At EPFL, this goal goes hand in hand with a wide understanding and an intersectional approach to diversity. This demands an enhanced awareness of existing inequalities, understanding mechanisms and the impact of implicit biases as evidenced by research, as well as strong social skills and

professional expertise from managers at all levels.

Respect

Everyone in the EPFL community is expected to contribute, through their behavior and actions, to a motivating work atmosphere and must respect the personal integrity of their colleagues.

The Equality Office in partnership with other instances at EPFL has developed the [e-learning module](#) “You are not alone. Promoting Respect”, mandatory for PhD candidates and highly recommended for all students and employees. In 45 minutes, this e-learning module explains how to identify inappropriate behavior and react to situations that cannot be tolerated.

Help and support

As stated above, EPFL promotes a culture of mutual respect. At the same time, misunderstandings and conflicts are part of life, and they can have an impact on studies and work environments.

Trust and Support Network



The [Trust and Support Network](#) (TSN) at EPFL gathers internal and external professionals that offer support in such situations with specific contacts for PhD candidates. The TSN offers listening, guidance and support in complete confidentiality in situations related to [psychosocial risks](#).

In all situations and whenever possible, we encourage PhD candidates to speak up right away and to clarify any situation that does not seem right. They have three primary options to seek support:

- a) Speak to a member of the academic community: thesis director, mentor, doctoral program administrator, peers, or colleagues may provide guidance on many aspects. For more information, see this webpage about [well-being](#) developed by PolyDoc.
- b) Speak to a social counselor. The counsellors offer individual support, coaching, counselling and wellbeing services (free of charge). To find out more, see [this page](#).
- c) Go to a psychotherapeutic consultation. This service is for temporary medical support or in case of crisis, offered in English or French. The first consultation is free of charge. For more information, see [this page](#).

Discover all services offered at EPFL through [Trust Point](#) available both online and through the [EPFL Pocket Campus](#) app.

Harassment and bullying

Under Swiss law, employers are required to protect various aspects of their employees' integrity and well-being. At EPFL, this protection is similarly extended to students. Professors, team leaders, and managers have a duty to act in situations involving conflict or harassment within their team or classroom. The course "[Protection of employee and student's health and personality](#)" is designed to support team leaders in meeting these responsibilities.

EPFL takes all allegations of [sexual and/or psychological harassment](#) concerning employees and students very seriously. Harassment claims may lead to an administrative and/or disciplinary investigation. If they are confirmed, the offenders are subject to sanctions, which may include dismissal or expulsion. Anyone who deliberately and improperly accuses an innocent person of harassment is subject to the same consequences. EPFL will protect anyone who, in good faith, reports acts perceived as harassment. No form of retaliation against them will be tolerated.

If you are being harassed or are aware of a situation, you should ask for help or advice as soon as possible. Find who to contact on [Trust Point](#).

Filing a formal complaint: the Respect Compliance Office (RCO)

The [Respect Compliance Office \(RCO\)](#) can be contacted by any person who feels that his or her physical or mental health and/or personal integrity have been affected by acts such as sexual harassment, mobbing, discrimination, violence, etc. in the workplace or at school. The RCO can be called upon to deal with any situation that has not found a consensual resolution, either autonomously or through the Trust and Support Network (TSN).

5. Participating in the governance of the PhD at EPFL

In this chapter, the organization of doctoral education at EPFL will be explained in more detail. This will be particularly useful for those interested in participating in its governance.

Doctoral School

EPFL has an institutional Doctoral School which is responsible for managing and coordinating doctoral education. It is under the responsibility of the Associate Vice President for Doctoral and Lifelong Education (AVP-DLE) and brings together all doctoral programs under one roof.

The Doctoral School acts as the central hub for doctoral education at EPFL, including regulations and policies. It employs the program administrators, oversees, supports and provides resources to all doctoral programs. Its mission includes maintaining a transversal skills training offer and running other complementary training programs and workshops for PhD candidates.

The Doctoral School collaborates directly with the doctoral programs and [PhD student representatives](#) facilitating their participation in EPFL initiatives on matters that concern them; it funds the association of PhD candidates [PolyDoc](#); and it strengthens the PhD community more broadly by organizing events and supporting bottom-up initiatives.

Registrar's Office

The [Registrar's Office](#) maintains the official academic records of all EPFL students and oversees many academic processes. A dedicated team supports doctoral candidates and works closely with the doctoral programs and the Doctoral School. They are the main point of contact for PhD candidates for questions about matriculation and the end of thesis.

Doctoral program committees

Each PhD program is headed by a PhD program director who is supported by a program committee of typically around ten members, mainly affiliated professors but also the [PhD student representatives](#). The committee organizes the program's courses and endorses its regulations. The professors in committee support the program director with respect to the admission of new PhD candidates, the monitoring of their progress, the running of the mentoring system and the resolution of conflicts. The committee may also allocate funds for the organization of scientific and social events

for the doctoral program.

Doctoral Commission

The Doctoral Commission (Cdoct) is an EPFL-level advisory body chaired by the Associate Vice President for Doctoral and Lifelong Education. All PhD program directors are members of the commission as well as up to six PhD student representatives. The Cdoct meets four times per year to discuss important topics linked to doctoral education and coordinate action between PhD programs. Every member of the doctoral community is welcome to submit proposals to the Cdoct.

Representation of PhD candidates

PhD candidates have formal representation as students in their doctoral programs and as employees of EPFL in the intermediate body (comprising postdocs, scientists, and scientific assistants).

PhD programs

Each doctoral program must have a PhD student representative or a team of PhD student representatives. They are elected by the PhD candidates of the doctoral program for a 2-year mandate. PhD representatives are members of the doctoral program committee and represent their peers. You can find the list of current representatives as well as a document detailing their role on this [webpage](#).

[PolyDoc](#) coordinates the PhD student representatives from all programs, to communicate with the EPFL Direction on relevant topics and to prepare meetings of the doctoral commission.

Intermediate body

PhD candidates are members of the EPFL intermediate body (with postdocs, scientists, and scientific assistants). The intermediate body has seats in the School Councils and at the [EPFL Assembly](#) and therefore PhD candidates may be elected as members. The School Councils discuss important topics with respect to their respective Schools while the EPFL Assembly coordinates consultations when changes to a “Lex” (EPFL regulation) are proposed by the Direction. The intermediate body representation is coordinated by [ELSA](#) (the scientific staff association).