

The background image shows a laboratory setting. On the left, a person wearing a full cleanroom suit, including a hood and mask, is working at a workstation. The workstation is a cleanroom cabinet with a glass front and a control panel. On the right, a large, complex microscope or imaging system is visible, with a large lens or camera head in the foreground. The entire scene is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue and purple gradient.

PhD Guide for Thesis Directors

2026 Edition

Dear Reader,

This guide is intended for those who take on the important role of thesis director or co-director for EPFL doctoral candidates. Supporting the development of doctoral candidates and witnessing their achievements is among the most rewarding aspects of an academic career. Clarity about the rules governing doctoral education can only help you in this task, which is why the Doctoral School has developed this short guide for the time-starved reader.

Should you need more information on specific topics, the more extensive PhD Guide is available at go.epfl.ch/phdguide – and of course, if in doubt, always ask the director or administrator of your doctoral program, they are ready to help you.

Thank you for your commitment to training the future generation of researchers.

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1. Overview of the PhD at EPFL

Supervising PhD candidates is an important task for all professors. Nurturing the growth and witnessing the successes of PhD candidates can be one of the most rewarding aspects of an academic career. Also, their contributions are crucial for the success of a research team. It is therefore important to understand the rules governing doctoral education. This document is intended as a quick guide to how the PhD is organized at EPFL.

1.1 Student and employee

To receive formal academic status as a doctoral candidate at EPFL, applicants must be accepted by a doctoral program. To be matriculated, they must also be offered employment as a doctoral assistant. The combination of the structured support offered by an academic program and the benefits linked to employment create attractive conditions to complete a doctorate at EPFL. The fundamental principle is that the student status (academic situation) of a PhD candidate determines their employment status. An employment contract can only be issued once a PhD program has given written confirmation of acceptance. In turn, the contract is renewed as long as the student status is valid.

For questions regarding the academic situation, you can [contact](#) the doctoral program of the PhD candidate, while matters related to their employment status are managed by the [VPH People Experience](#) team. If in doubt, you can contact either and they will redirect you if needed.

Academic legal basis	Employment legal basis
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lex 2.4.0.1: Ordinance on the doctorate conferred by the EPFL• Lex 2.4.1: Directive concerning doctoral studies at the EPFL• Lex 2.4.2: The regulations of each doctoral program	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• LPers: Law on the Swiss Confederation personnel (in French)• OPers - EPF: Ordinance on the personnel of the ETH Domain (in French)• Lex 4.4.1: Directive on Terms of Employment of EPFL Assistants

1.2 Key concepts

In the following, you will find short definitions of key concepts linked to the doctorate at EPFL.

Doctoral programs

[Doctoral programs](#) are responsible for monitoring the progress of each PhD candidate from admission to graduation. They organize doctoral courses and bring together their scientific community by organizing events. Academic decisions are taken by the program director. You can request affiliation with any PhD program relevant to your research interests. Affiliation means you can access the pool of applicants and supervise PhD candidates in the program. In turn, you will be expected to serve as an examiner, jury president and mentor as well as offer doctoral courses.

Thesis director

The thesis director is the academic supervisor of the PhD candidate who guides and evaluates their scientific progress. Every PhD candidate must have a primary thesis director who is an EPFL professor, or a senior scientist (*maître d'enseignement et de recherche*) who has the right to supervise PhD theses.

Thesis co-director

One thesis co-director may be appointed subject to approval by the program director and the Doctoral School. Thesis co-directors participate in all academic assessments; are named in the thesis and on the PhD diploma; must hold a doctorate; must be actively engaged in research; and can be external from EPFL.

Mentor

Thesis directors affiliated with a doctoral program will be invited to serve as mentors. A mentor does not have a supervisory function with respect to the mentee; their role is to support the mentee's professional and personal development in the absence of a hierarchical relationship.

Teaching assistance

As part of their employment duties, PhD candidates must provide teaching assistance (TA) for bachelor and master courses. PhD candidates are assigned to the section of their thesis director. The section sets the rules for its TAs and coordinates its TA pool. Thesis directors must support their PhD candidates in the accomplishment of their teaching duties.

Off-site doctorates

A PhD thesis may be prepared partly or entirely outside EPFL, including the possibility of external employment, subject to certain conditions and approval by the program director to ensure the conditions are suitable for a doctorate, signature of an IP agreement, and compensation which is at minimum meeting the standardized EPFL salary scale for doctoral assistants. In all cases, an EPFL thesis director takes responsibility for the thesis and ensures that the academic quality standards of EPFL are upheld. A thesis co-director from the host institution may be appointed provided they meet the minimal requirements.

2. Admission to doctoral studies

Prospective PhD candidates must fulfill two conditions to be able to matriculate for the doctorate:

- They must apply to and be accepted by one of the [EPFL doctoral programs](#).
- They must have an offer for a PhD position from the future thesis director(s).

Please distinguish between these two situations:

- **'Admissible'** status means the applicant has fulfilled the first condition only.
- **'Admitted'** status means the applicant has fulfilled both conditions and was matriculated.

2.1 Application to the PhD program

Applications are processed according to the deadlines set by each doctoral program, generally twice a year. Some but not all programs accept reviewing an application in fast-track if the future thesis director is already known and specifically requests it.

Applicants must hold a master's degree or equivalent to be eligible and undergo an independent evaluation by the PhD program committee, which decides whether the applicant is 'admissible'. The committee may exceptionally consider outstanding graduates of a 4-year bachelor program. 'Admissible' status is valid for one year and can be understood as a pre-approval to matriculate conditional to securing an offer for a PhD position from a thesis director.

Note that the PhD programs EDBB, EDCB, EDFI, EDIC, EDMS, and EDNE operate special admissions processes. Please contact the respective program to learn more.

2.2 Making an offer

Recruiting suitable PhD candidates is key to building and sustaining a high-performance research team, so it is important to invest appropriate time and resources in the process. You can identify potential PhD candidates from the list of admissible applicants of the PhD program(s) you are affiliated with; you can directly advertise available positions; and, occasionally, you will receive a direct recommendation from a trusted colleague. Keep in mind that in whichever way you identify a promising candidate, every prospective PhD candidate must apply to a PhD program and be accepted by its committee. Therefore, never make an offer prior to knowing the outcome of the admissibility assessment by the PhD program.

The Doctoral School recommends in the strongest terms to make offers only to applicants you have interviewed in person and to include others, such as your team and/or colleagues and your People Experience partner, in the selection process. A recruitment mistake due to time pressure or not benefiting from others' perspectives may upset the dynamics of your research team even if the person leaves soon again, and can take years to recover from.

Important: You can only make an offer if you have secured resources for a 4-year doctorate.

3. Thesis directors' duties

You have responsibilities and duties under EPFL regulations in both your role as thesis director and hierarchical line manager. In short, you are required to:

- guide the PhD candidate and ensure that the thesis progresses smoothly;
- establish appropriate working conditions and allocate the resources necessary for the successful completion of the thesis project;
- assume final responsibility for the thesis project, ensuring full compliance with EPFL guidelines and best practices in scientific integrity;
- ensure the PhD candidates works in a safe, respectful and supportive environment, and that they take all their holiday leave in accordance with their employment contract;
- ensure the PhD candidate can fulfill their obligations, including coursework and teaching assistance.
- support the PhD candidate in building a professional network through attending conferences and workshops where they can present and discuss their results.

4. The PhD curriculum

4.1 Overview

The basic PhD 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. Once these requirements are met, the PhD candidate is formally admitted to the preparation of the thesis and will focus 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(s) and submitted to the doctoral program. To complete the doctorate, each PhD candidate must have been matriculated for at least two years and 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.



4.2 The first year

By the end of the first year, each PhD candidate must complete the courses required by the program; have an approved research plan; and pass the candidacy examination¹.

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 for 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](#).

¹ Note that in Computer and Communication Sciences (EDIC) and Finance (EDFI), PhD candidates must also identify and confirm a thesis director during the first year

4.3 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 doctoral program. 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 subject to advance approval by the PhD program.

4.4 Making progress

Formal progress update: the annual report

PhD candidates and thesis directors are in regular exchange about the progress of the thesis. To complement this exchange, the doctoral regulations require that progress is formally recorded once per year in a mandatory report, completed in a dedicated [online tool](#) and coordinated by the doctoral programs. The first annual report is due one year after the candidacy examination.

The annual report offers an opportunity to take a step back from routine exchanges and assess the overall the status of the thesis. While shorter-term objectives change often with new results, the annual report helps confirm or adjust the long-term objectives. Thesis directors expect more autonomy as PhD candidates gain experience; therefore, the annual report is also an opportunity to discuss what level of independence is expected (e.g. frequency of meetings and detail of feedback).

In the annual report, the thesis director(s) 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.

If you have questions about how to best proceed in situations where you believe there is a need for improvement or unsatisfactory progress, the PhD program director is available to discuss.

Unsatisfactory progress

While fortunately a rare occurrence, a situation may arise in which the thesis director considers a PhD candidate's knowledge or progress unsatisfactory. In such cases the program director must intervene and should be contacted. The role of the program director is to evaluate the situation and ensure a balanced academic assessment, notably taking into consideration the previous annual report. The program director may discuss the situation separately with the PhD candidate. Based on their evaluation of the situation, the program director may decide to trigger the formal process:

- 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. Such a notification may be directly included in the annual report.
- A new assessment is made by the thesis director(s) 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.

Many PhD candidates manage to meet the requirements and thus resolve the issues. However, should the PhD candidate fail to improve the situation, an exclusion from the doctoral program may follow. For PhD candidates employed by EPFL, exclusion would initiate the termination of their employment.

Disagreements

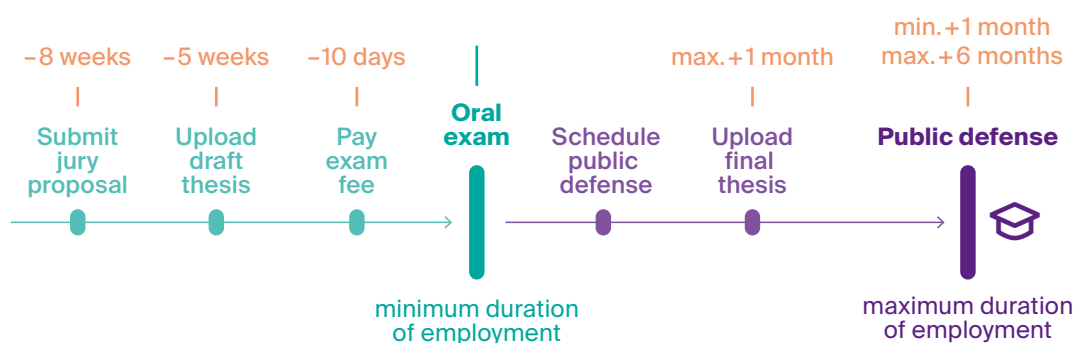
It is strongly recommended to contact the program director as soon as possible in case of disagreements or other problems that may cause serious delays to the thesis. By regulation, the program director has a duty to endeavor to resolve such disagreements.

4.5 Towards the end of the PhD

Extension of the PhD

An extension of the doctorate is possible up to a maximum total duration of six years. Requests must be justified and require full approval from both the doctoral program and the Doctoral School. The first request can be for maximum twelve months; subsequent requests can be for maximum six months. Requests can only be accepted if the financial means for the contract extension are in place for the whole duration of the extension.

Important: the VPH People Experience team can only renew or extend the employment contract after the full approval of the request. It is therefore recommended to submit extension requests between six and three months prior to the current oral examination deadline to allow sufficient time for the renewal of the contract, visa and work permit.



Graduation process

To graduate, PhD candidates must pass a private oral examination and subsequently hold a public defense, at the end of which the thesis director will confer the doctoral degree. Practical information about the administrative steps towards graduation can be found in the [FAQ End of thesis](#).

Oral examination

The oral examination jury is proposed by the thesis director and PhD program director to the Associate Vice President for Doctoral and Lifelong Education. The jury is composed of a jury president, the thesis director(s), an internal examiner and two external examiners. Note that jury members must hold a PhD title and not have a close personal or professional relationship with the candidate or thesis director.

The thesis director and the examiners each write a report on the thesis to the attention of the jury president. During the oral examination, 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.

The jury can nominate PhD candidates for a [research award](#) (with prize money) and/or the doctoral program [thesis distinction](#) (an academic distinction given to the best 10% of theses defended during a given year).

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 presents their thesis and receives the doctoral degree.

Public dissemination of the thesis

EPFL is required to publish the final version of the thesis accepted by the jury in extenso. The thesis director and PhD candidate sign a thesis dissemination agreement that authorizes EPFL to make the thesis accessible online (see [this webpage](#): 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. For more information see [this webpage](#).

Employment during the final phases of the PhD

PhD candidates must be employed at least until the date of the oral examination. Following the oral examination, employment as a doctoral assistant may continue until the public defense per agreement with the thesis director and the VPH People Experience department.

Should the PhD candidate receive a conditional pass or fail, employment can continue until the public defense as is the case for a pass. However, whether employment may be mandatory depends on the specific situation, notably the nature of the corrections or additional work requested by the jury.

Continuation as a postdoctoral researcher or sciencepreneur

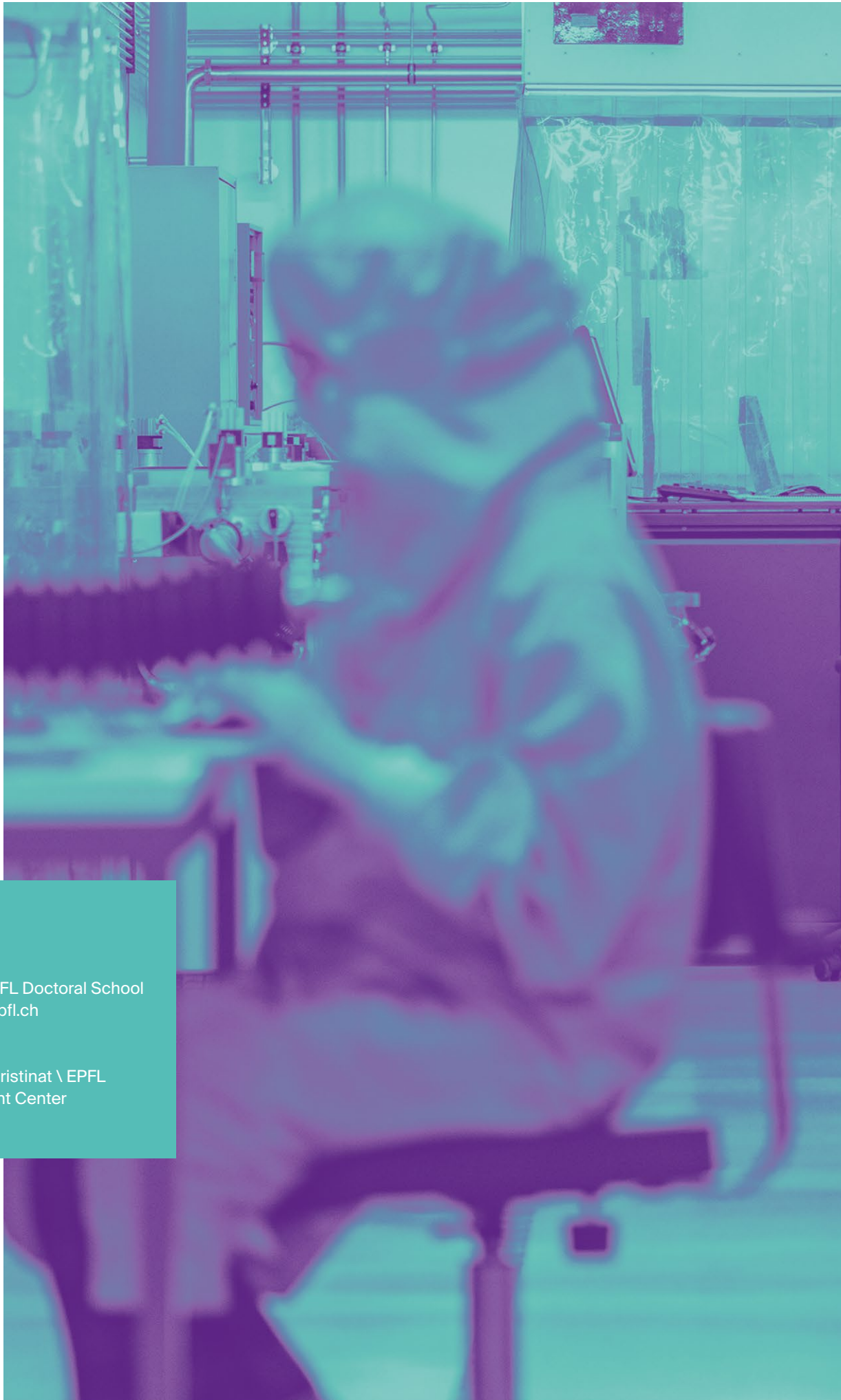
A transition is possible from a PhD contract to a postdoctoral contract: it requires approval by the VPH People Experience department and is only feasible if the responsibilities evolve and align with those typically expected of a postdoctoral researcher. The postdoctoral contract should be for at least three months, and all the vacation days linked to the PhD contract must be taken before the transition. Note that the total duration of employment, including both the PhD and the postdoctoral contracts, must not exceed six years ([Lex 4.4.1](#)). Postdocs who obtain the 'Sciencepreneur' status because they are incubating a startup project within an EPFL lab may have a postdoctoral EPFL contract extending to up to 36 months after the thesis (for more information see [this webpage](#)).

5. Employment conditions for PhD candidates

A quick overview of the most important employment conditions for PhD candidates:

- PhD candidates are employed as ‘doctoral assistants’ on one-year fixed-term contracts, renewed annually until the oral examination.
- PhD candidates have dual status as both students and employees, and therefore all the rights and obligations of an employee apply to them.
- All foreign nationals are subject to work permit or authorization procedures, which typically take around two to three months to complete.
- PhD candidates are employed at a standardized salary scale.
- The standard work rate for PhD candidates is 100%. Part-time doctorates are not generally possible; exceptions are considered for justified cases (e.g. PhD candidates who are parents).
- The employment contract is aligned with the duration of the PhD. If the PhD is extended beyond four years, the employment contract must be extended accordingly and at least until the oral examination.
- There is no probationary period for PhD candidates.
- Swiss social security contributions (1st and 2nd pillars) are mandatory and are automatically deducted from the salary (see also here and here). The pension fund is managed by Publica, the federal pension fund.
- For non-Swiss PhD candidates holding a B or L residence permit, income tax is automatically deducted from the salary.
- PhD candidates who are parents benefit from family allowances.
- Work schedules are arranged by agreement between the thesis director and the PhD candidate based on the principle of trust.
- EPFL has adopted the principle of flexible working hours; extra hours and overtime are not compensated.
- PhD candidates are entitled to 25 days of paid vacation per year (excluding public holidays). Thesis directory should ensure the yearly holiday entitlement is taken within the same calendar year, with at least two consecutive weeks of vacation per year.
- Teleworking from abroad is generally not permitted. An exception of up to a maximum of two weeks per year may be granted.
- All ancillary activities must be authorized
- PhD candidates need to discuss when they take their holidays with the thesis director and agree on a plan some weeks or months in advance.
- As part of their employment duties, PhD candidates must provide teaching assistance to the section of their thesis director. The thesis director must enable them to fulfil this obligation.
- A medical certificate must be provided after three days of absence – the financial cost of a PhD student on medical leave is covered by the lab for the first six months.

If you have any question related to employment contracts or human resources, please contact the VPH People Experience team via [this website](#).



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