

Doctoral School Mentoring Program

Supervision and mentoring

At EPFL, thesis director(s) fulfil the core task of academic supervision, i.e. guiding and evaluating the supervisee's academic progress. Mentoring is understood in its broader sense as an activity focused on supporting the mentee's overall personal and professional development.

The tasks of supervision and mentoring are related: thesis directors strive to be both good supervisors and good mentors of their PhD candidates. However, in some situations PhD candidates require the advice of a mentor who has no supervisory or hierarchical relationship with them. Therefore, the EPFL Doctoral School established an official mentoring program.

Mentoring program at EPFL

At EPFL, each PhD candidate has a mentor. The mentor is experienced in supervising their own PhD candidates but has no supervisory or hierarchical relationship with the mentee. By default, the identity of the mentor is not known the thesis director(s) and the exchanges between mentors and mentees are confidential¹. This gives mentees the freedom to be open about their concerns. This openness is a benefit to the PhD mentors who thus gain valuable insights on how to become better supervisors themselves.

The mentor and mentee should meet at least once per year, or more often depending on the mentee's needs.

Please refer to your PhD program to find out how mentors are assigned, who your mentor or mentee is and to learn more about the mentoring rules that apply to you.

Basic expectations

Mentee

- Drives the mentor-mentee relationship with professionalism and integrity
- Reaches out to the mentor at least once per year; and more often if needed
- Prepares for the meetings with their mentor (topics and questions to discuss)
- Maintains confidentiality

Mentor

- Makes themselves available when the mentee requests a meeting
- Listens openly and offers practical advice and guidance
- Does not resolve issues on behalf of the mentee
- Maintains confidentiality

¹Limits of confidentiality:

- Conversations between mentors and mentees are generally guaranteed to remain confidential. However, there are rare situations where disclosure of information is required by law or regulation, in legal proceedings, or when it is necessary to protect the overriding interests of EPFL or the public.
- If in doubt, a mentor may contact the doctoral program for advice by making an anonymized report.

Worksheet to prepare for mentor-mentee meetings

Typically, a mentor will:

- Help the mentee reflect on their career goals
- Share insights and strategies to succeed in the broader field
- Listen actively and create a space to discuss the mentee's challenges
- Provide feedback on the mentee's observable professional behaviours
- Encourage independent thinking and problem-solving
- Help the mentee to contact the PhD program director or support services, if needed

Possible topics to discuss:

How the meetings will be organized

- How meetings will be scheduled
- Format for the meetings (e.g., in-person, virtual, phone)
- Preferred communication methods
- Meeting frequency
- How to reschedule or cancel meetings

Career paths & goals

- The unwritten rules of success in the broader field
- Important trends in the broader field
- How to best prepare for an academic career in the broader field
- Career opportunities outside of academia in the broader field
- How to expand the professional network and leverage EPFL resources

Personal development

- What are the mentees strengths and areas of improvement
- How others may perceive the mentee
- How to make a particular decision
- How to accept feedback for growth

Current environment and tasks

- Work culture and collaboration in the current environment
- How to best collaborate with others
- How to maintain work-life balance
- How to better manage time and prioritize tasks

Overcoming challenges

- Challenges the mentee is currently facing
- How the mentor handled similar challenges in the past
- How to handle a difficult conversation or disagreement
- How to navigate a challenging situation with the thesis director(s)