

# The PhD agreement:

## Discussing roles and expectations

The PhD process is a joint endeavour in which the respective roles of both parties involve different rights and obligations. PhD agreements serve to make the rights and responsibilities of supervisors and PhD students transparent. They also help to address important topics in a timely and structured manner, and thus facilitate planning and monitoring the PhD process. Finally, PhD agreements serve to establish and maintain best PhD-related practices.

For a document template, which may be modified to fit specific needs, please see

► [www.opsy.unisg.ch/en/counselling/PhDjourney](http://www.opsy.unisg.ch/en/counselling/PhDjourney).

For PhD agreements to be effective, both parties need to invest time and energy to identify and discuss relevant issues. These should not be discussed in passing as both parties should be given the chance to prepare and document the session outcomes.

An initial *kick-off meeting* (within the first few weeks) should serve: (1) to make transparent the various roles and stages of the PhD process; (2) to identify important topics and agree on a timeframe for discussing these; and (3) to reach agreement on the most important issues involving requirements, expectations and structural conditions of the PhD. Importantly, even if questions cannot be answered immediately, agreeing by when and how these questions should be answered greatly helps PhD students and supervisors manage the PhD process and their relationship.

Regular update meetings (*once a semester*) should be used to revisit, supplement and, if necessary, modify the initial agreement. If used in this way, the agreement also helps illustrate the evolving PhD process from both sides and for mutual benefit.

Kick-off meetings should be jointly prepared by supervisors and PhD students. However, responsibility for meeting documentation (e.g. drawing up and sending out an agenda as well as a status report) lies primarily with PhD students.

Moreover, PhD students are responsible for documenting agreements and for sending reports to their supervisors. Supervisors in turn are advised to set aside time to read and if necessary to comment on the documentation. Supervisors also ought to acknowledge the receipt of meeting summaries. PhD students may assume that their PhD supervisor accepts the meeting documentation unless he or she offers comments.

# Topics for PhD agreements

## 1. Collaboration

Collaboration concerns PhD- and work-related issues. Considering the length and intensity of the shared journey, discussing what good collaboration requires early on may have long-term benefits. This is the case especially when supervisors have sparse direct contact with PhDs, either because they are on sabbatical or because the candidate is external.

### 1.1. Establish a shared understanding of meeting organisation

- How should appointments be scheduled? How long in advance? How many?
- How far in advance should the candidate send the agenda and any written materials?
- Which kind of feedback will the supervisor provide? Which kind of feedback would the candidate find helpful?
- How will supervisor and student update each other between meetings (e.g. about colloquia, conferences, vacation, problems, etc.)?

### 1.2. Establish a shared understanding of roles

- What different roles do I/we need to fulfil?
- How do I/we want to deal with the overlapping of roles?
- How do I/we understand these different roles?
- Which specific role expectations and wishes exist?
- How can I/we help each other avoid role conflicts?

### 1.3. Anticipate conflicts to avoid them

- What should be done in case of conflict?
- Who should be involved in case of disagreement or conflict?

### 1.4. If inevitable, openly discuss contract termination to avoid escalation

Despite the best intentions and efforts, PhD processes sometimes need to be terminated. In this event, supervisors are required to notify the PhD Office in writing. Termination may be initiated by either party and requires giving personal or professional reasons.

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## 2. PhD-related issues

In many PhD processes, the specific contents of a doctoral project will only evolve later. We recommend discussing the following issues early on, in order to provide PhD students with orientation and to anticipate necessary intermediate steps.

### 2.1. Define the scope of the PhD

- Which specific assessment criteria (if any) exist? Where can they be accessed?
- Which specific field of research is the PhD candidate aiming or required to contribute to?
- Should any specific methods, theories, etc. be used or avoided?
- Do specific expectations exist about thesis length, academic audience, etc.?

## 2.2. Resolve formal matters

- Will the thesis be cumulative? Or is a monograph more suitable? Give reasons.
- Which language will the thesis be written in?
- Which length and state of the individual papers are expected for cumulative PhD theses? How long is a monograph expected to be?
- How will a co-supervisor be selected? Are other people supporting, mentoring, supervising, or evaluating the candidate?

## 2.3. Consider ethical issues

- Does the project raise any ethical concerns? If so, how are these addressed?
- Does the University's Ethics Committee need to be involved to ensure project realisation? If so, which steps ought to be taken next?

## 2.4. Make decisions on co-authorship transparent

- In case of co-authorship, how will the University's Code of Academic Integrity be put into practice?
- Which arrangements are required for the candidate to include a co-authored paper in his or her PhD thesis?

## 2.5. Discuss PhD-related expenses and grants

- Is the candidate eligible for funding (e.g. conferences, summer schools, printing costs, etc.)?
- Will he or she receive grant application support? If so, which criteria apply? What is a feasible timeline (e.g. for Doc.Mobility)?

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# 3. PhD time line

We encourage early discussion to establish a joint understanding of a feasible timeframe. This also ensures that both parties are familiar with the formal criteria and with the specific traditions of the respective field of study.

- What is a realistic estimate of how long the PhD process will take? \_\_\_\_\_
- What is the official admission date for PhD studies? \_\_\_\_\_
- When at the latest should the research proposal be submitted? \_\_\_\_\_
- What is the approximate date of thesis submission? \_\_\_\_\_

## 3.1. Draw up a work plan

Each supervision session should discuss the next steps and tasks to be undertaken by the next session. This establishes clarity and balances the overall workload. Consider discussing the following points:

- Milestones, e.g. during the first year
- Required courses during the PhD programme (course title and description)
- Research output (type of publication, title, abstract)
- Literature reviews
- Data collection and methodological competencies
- Analytical steps and data reports
- Writing output

## 3.2. PhD process updates and feedback

Both parties should review the project timeline at least once a semester:

- Which steps have been implemented? Which goals could not be reached? Why not?
- How does the supervisor evaluate the candidate's performance in terms of quality and progress?

- How does the candidate assess his or her progress and the circumstances under which this was achieved?
- Does overall planning need to be adapted?

### **3.3. Coordinate project-presentation opportunities**

Discussing and receiving feedback from different audiences is an important element of the PhD process. Supervisors and PhD students should coordinate these formats in good time to enable third parties to provide support.

- Colloquia (title, short description)
- Conferences (title, type of contribution, place, costs and cost unit)
- Brown-bag seminars
- Peer-organised feedback
- Developmental seminars

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## **4. Work issues**

Contractual work issues should best be addressed in the recruiting phase and resolved at the latest during the first few weeks of employment. We recommend holding one meeting a year to update the job description and to exchange feedback on non-PhD related work tasks.

### **4.1. Define work-related tasks and associated expectations**

We recommend (1) listing the specific tasks to be performed, (2) formulating the corresponding expectations for each task and (3) approximating how much contracted annual work time should be spent on each task:

- Teaching assistance (teaching assignments over the next 1-2 semesters):
- Research assistance (supporting BA and MA theses, research projects, etc.):
- Administrative duties (which tasks):
- Project work (which tasks):
- Other work (which tasks):
- PhD-related work (% , h/year):

Note: Should PhD candidates spend more hours a year performing instructed tasks not directly related to their PhD project (e.g. projects, administrative tasks or teaching assistance) than contractually agreed, a separate written agreement stipulating overtime compensation should be drawn up (e.g. PhD sabbatical).

### **4.2. Job task updates and feedback**

Feedback sessions should begin with supervisors and candidates sharing their performance assessments (process and quality of achievements):

- Which tasks were performed?
- Which goals were reached? Which were not reached? Why not?
- How does the supervisor evaluate the candidate's performance?
- How does the candidate assess the supervisor's job-related leadership and support?
- How do the parties experience their collaboration on the defined tasks?