

What is a PhD committee and how does it work at the FGSE?

This document is intended to act as supportive guidelines for the Ph.D. committee and subsequent meetings as outlined in **Article 14** of the *Regulations for the doctoral degree* of the FGSE

The PhD committee

The role of a PhD committee is to provide support and advice to the PhD candidate including feedback on their progress. Whilst the supervisor(s) have the primary responsibility of guiding the student's research to successful completion, the committee also shares some of this responsibility. Students should not view the committee as an obstacle, but rather as providing additional mentors and possible promoters of their thesis research. For instance, when applying for jobs, committee members may be additional choices for seeking recommendation letters.

The PhD committee is composed of one to three independent professionals (i.e., who are not involved in the supervision of the doctoral work) who have complementary expertise in terms of both the research focus and the challenges that a PhD student can face during their studies. The committee members are chosen by both the supervisor(s) and PhD student. PhD committees should usually include an internal member of the faculty, or, if justified, of another of the UNIL faculty (the faculty referent if there is one, see *Regulations for the doctoral degree (RegDoc)* of the FGSE, Article 6.2, can also be the internal committee member) and external members. We recommend at least one internal and one external member.

Any qualified academics can be chosen as PhD committee members (including first assistants, post-doctoral researchers, PAT researchers). Non-academics can also act as external committee members, but the committee should include at least one member who has completed a PhD or who is experienced in PhD supervision. While the composition of the PhD committee may evolve along the doctoral journey depending on the PhD thesis' development, the internal member is expected to follow the whole doctoral journey.

The committee members take part in annual meetings (see below) but can also be solicited by the PhD student or the supervisor(s) outside of the annual meetings to provide support in relation to scientific matters or to act as mediators when difficulties are encountered between the parties involved in the thesis.

PhD committee members can be part of the doctoral Jury as far as they comply with the rule on conflict of interest (see RegDoc article 18.2 of the FGSE) including no actual or foreseen coauthored publication coming out from the doctoral work).

What is a PhD committee meeting?

A PhD committee meeting (PCM) is an annual meeting during the doctoral work to which the PhD candidate and their supervisor(s) (and faculty referent when there is one) invite the PhD committee members for a work session around the PhD progress.

In the FGSE, the **PCM is not a qualifying exam**. It is a formative rather than a summative assessment **intended to benefit the PhD student and the progress of the PhD project**. The purpose of the PCM is to help the PhD candidate assess their progress, to provide feedback and guidance on the PhD work, to share ideas, knowledge, and suggestions. PCMs can also help in detecting issues such as conflicts, difficulties the student is encountering, concerns over progress, etc. at stages early enough that they can be solved.

The first committee meeting is particularly important as it validates the motive and grounding of the doctoral project and helps set the research questions and work plans for the upcoming years. It must be held at the end of the first year or the beginning of the second year. For the following years, the PCM provides an opportunity to discuss data and results, assess progress, reflect on the doctoral project's timeline, design the final PhD thesis, and eventually suggest improvements or changes.

Doctoral activity and the discussions of the PCM are the subject of an overall report (preliminary activity report (I and II) and discussion report (III)) to be sent on an annual basis to the doctoral students' secretariat at the Dean's Office (see structure of the report below).

How to prepare for a PhD committee meeting?

- **Preliminary Report**

Before the PCM, the PhD candidate prepares an activity report according to the provided template (parts I and II), to be completed by a summary of the PCM key-points after the meeting (part III). The activity report covers the period since the beginning of the PhD work (1st PCM) or since the last PCM and involves two parts:

- (I) The first part is a factual activity report listing all kinds of productions (articles, participation in conferences or workshops) or achievements over the concerned periods, all training or courses followed by the PhD students, and all teaching, outreach activities or services accomplished by the PhD student.
- (II) The second part presents the research accomplished (e.g., motive for the work, state of the art, research questions, and progress in the research work). This second part can vary in length and content depending on the PhD stage. The chosen format and length of the research part is a trade-off between providing the PCM with enough information so they can arrive prepared while being sufficiently concise to comply with the limited time availability of the PCM.

We recommend that the report does not exceed 10-15 pages in length, but there is no minimum length except for the first PCM where there should be a clear statement of the PhDs aims and objectives, a justification of their originality and significance, an outline of the proposed methodology and, ideally, some evidence of progress with advancing the research (e.g., a designed questionnaire; preliminary results; synthesis of existing data etc.). The report aims to prepare the committee members for the presentation and discussion, during which the research can be presented in extenso.

Organization of a PCM

PhD committee meetings are 1—to 2-hour in-person or hybrid meetings during which the PhD student presents the progress of their work and work plan for the upcoming year as a baseline for discussion with the committee members.

All members should first agree upon how/when questions will be asked (along the flow of the presentation or after). We recommend that the PhD student and supervisor(s) take notes on questions raised and key elements of the discussion. Those will be key for writing the summary in Part III of the PCM report. To ease this process and if all parties agree, it is possible to record the meeting for later reference when writing the summary. This ensures that important points raised do not get lost.

Important information:

At the end of the meeting, the PhD student must be given the opportunity to discuss with the committee members in the absence of the supervisor(s). Similarly, the supervisor(s) is/are given the opportunity to discuss with the committee members in the absence of the PhD student. This procedure creates a safe space in which potential conflicts or difficulties can be raised with the committee members and discussed before they become too serious. **Please make the committee members aware that they can directly contact the doctoral secretary, institute director, or Vice-Dean for Research if they detect a problematic situation.**

After the PCM

Final report

- (III) The supervisor(s) and PhD candidate should fill in part III (discussion) of the report template as soon as possible after the committee meeting. The report should contain a summary of the key discussions during the meeting. The report should be signed by all committee members, however, if the candidate and supervisor have diverging points of view or want to communicate their points of view in a confidential way to the secretary and vice-dean, separate reports can be sent to the secretary/vice-dean.

In all cases, the consignment will include the three parts mentioned above (I, II), (III).

Recommended schedule

- At least 2 months before the planned date for the meeting, the supervisor(s) and PhD candidate contact the committee members and book a room.
- 2 weeks before the date: the PhD student sends his activity report to the committee members. The report should be prepared following the provided template (Parts I and II).
- After the PhD committee meeting, the report is completed for Part III by the supervisor(s) (on behalf of the committee) and the PhD student. All committee members, supervisors and the PhD student should sign. The complete report, with all sections completed and signed (preliminary I & II and discussion report III), should then be sent to phd-gse@unil.ch to be registered. The first-year report is systematically checked and signed by the Vice-Dean for research. For reports of later stages, any party can ask for a check by the Vice-Dean by ticking the dedicated box on the template.