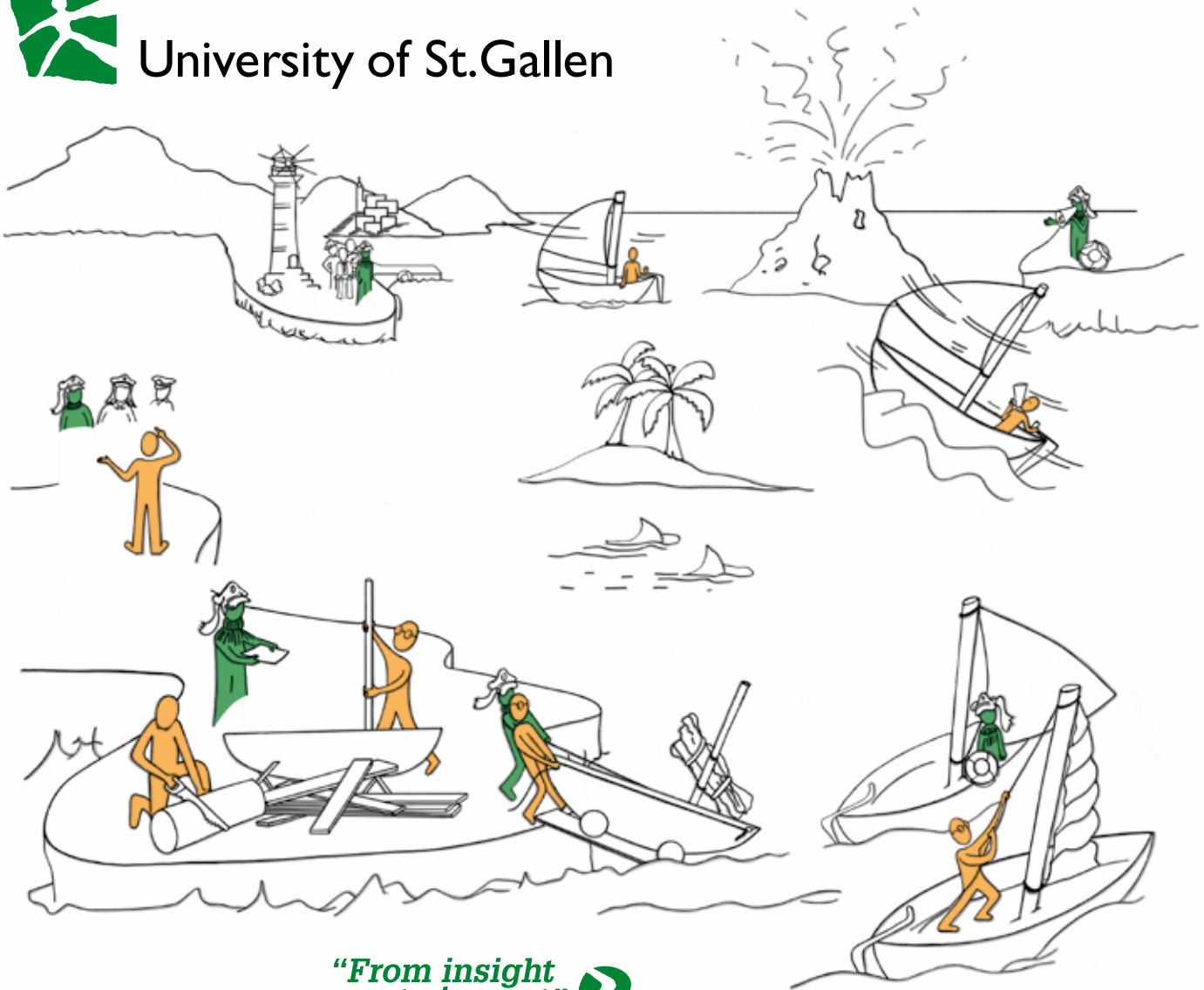




University of St.Gallen



*“From insight  
to impact”* 

The PhD journey:  
A shared responsibility



# Foreword



Prof. Dr. Thomas Bieger  
President



Prof. Dr. Kuno Schedler  
Vice President Research & Faculty

Currently, about 700 PhD students are pursuing doctoral studies at the University of St.Gallen (HSG) in seven different programmes. Our PhD programmes prepare graduates for both an academic and a professional career. Based on the HSG's core competencies, these programmes combine rigour with relevance: state-of-the-art training in the latest research methods, for example at the University's Global School in Empirical Research Methods (GSERM), and strong ties with the practical world.

Taking on a PhD student is a decision which requires supervisors to support and guide candidates on their PhD journey for at least three and sometimes even up to five years. This journey is structured by a number of phases. An intensive course phase is followed by an individual research project, often in a research team and always under the supervision of a senior faculty member. Initial research experience, introduction to the scientific community and close collaboration with colleagues can be deeply satisfying for PhD students. Sometimes, however, this can be extremely challenging and require candidates to go to their limits, not to mention that they may encounter a number of unforeseen challenges and struggles. Thus, while supervising PhD candidates on their journey is deeply rewarding, it may also be highly challenging. To make this shared journey as rewarding as possible, the HSG provides various closely interlinked consultancy services, not only for PhD students but also for supervisors. This brochure is part of several measures to provide institutional support for PhD students and their supervisors at the HSG. The new PhD regulations, introduced in 2017, clarify supervisors' and students' legitimate expectations. Among others, the new regulations have reduced PhD students' dependence on their supervisors by enabling them to request an additional evaluation of their thesis in case of conflict. Also since 2017, the University's Young Investigator Programme (YIP) has been offering a number of courses, further training opportunities and mentoring tailored to the specific needs of PhD students. The University is firmly pursuing its efforts to comply with the latest national and international quality and compliance standards, with a view to enabling its PhD students to produce outstanding research.

We wish all PhD supervisors and students a fruitful and rewarding experience and encourage you to approach any of our services for professional support.

# Note from the authors

This brochure presents a co-constructive supervision model for PhD students and PhD supervisors. The model highlights the principles of *transparency, cooperation and ethically-informed professionalism*. It supplements the University's official regulations and guidelines by providing various materials designed to support PhD supervisors and PhD students in managing the complex PhD journey. Although the brochure is written in close alignment with these official regulations and guidelines, we nevertheless recommend readers to also consult these documents (see page 26).

The brochure rests on our strong conviction that the effort invested in transparently communicating expectations, the mutual responsibility for structuring the PhD process, as well as sensitivity to ethical boundaries can enhance the quality of work, improve well-being and work satisfaction as well as lower the PhD dropout rate.

The following pages provide practical guidance on organising the PhD process. They also highlight a number of important issues that PhD students and supervisors need to address and clarify during the PhD process. While many of these issues are generally considered important for any PhD process, others are related to the specific supervision framework at the University of St.Gallen. This framework provides both supervisors and candidates with broad scope for shaping the PhD process in accordance with their ideals, specific areas of research, institutional requirements and personal preferences. It offers room for both basic and applied research projects as well as different funding models. The framework also underlines the importance of the PhD supervisor and enables supervisors and PhDs to share different roles (see page 10), even if it leaves ample space for distributing these complex responsibilities.

The freedom provided requires both parties to take responsibility for the PhD process, to be sensitive to possible role conflicts and to actively clarify their expectations, rights and privileges in order to ensure a productive and fair process for both parties. Consequently, this brochure focuses primarily on the dyadic work relationship between PhD supervisors and PhD students. It does so even if we also wish to emphasise that PhD students and supervisors should consciously seek to defocus this relationship by integrating others into the PhD process whenever possible.

We would like to thank Prof. Kuno Schedler and Fiorella Schmucki for initiating and making this brochure possible. Moreover, we extend our thanks to PD. Dr. Monika Kurath, Dr. Verena Witzig, Prof. Julia Nentwich, Prof. Chris Steyaert and Prof. Peter Hettich for providing valuable feedback and recommendations for this brochure. Finally, we thank Dr. Mark Kyburz for his editorial support as well as Susanne Alpers for her illustrations of the PhD journey.

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# Introduction for PhD supervisors

Academia has changed significantly in recent decades. While its key virtues (curiosity and knowledge creation) remain essential, the pace of academic life has accelerated significantly. Moreover, its tasks and challenges have diversified even further. Today, academics are expected to build international networks, to publish in highly competitive international outlets, to facilitate academic programmes compliant with multiple global accreditation agencies, to secure external research funding and to provide innovative and participatory teaching. They are also expected to promote their research and to demonstrate its positive impact on a local and a global scale. Finally, while the rise of digital technologies has created many more opportunities, it has become even harder for academics to disconnect from work. Consequently, the supervision of PhD processes has undoubtedly also become more complex.

Against this background, it is important to understand PhD supervision as relational work. PhD supervisors and PhD candidates need to *share the responsibility* for ensuring the quality and completion of the PhD process. Achieving this goal requires both sides to devote the necessary time and effort to creating a good working relationship. The effects of good PhD supervisor-student relations are well known: inspiration and higher quality.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, poor work relations may negatively impact a candidate's well-being or even lead to interrupting a doctoral project.<sup>17</sup> <sup>18</sup> <sup>20</sup> Given the importance of the supervisor's role, it is essential to consider how best to establish good rapport as the basis of effective and empowering PhD processes leading to successful project completion.

Finally, PhD supervisors should very carefully consider recruiting new PhD candidates. It is of utmost importance to allow enough time for the selection process as well as for preliminary meetings. Both measures can help further reduce the PhD dropout rate as well as prevent possible conflicts. A structured selection process can also be used to make mutual expectations transparent, to agree on these and thus to get the process off to a good start.

17 | Devine, K., & Hunter, K. H. (2017). PhD student emotional exhaustion: the role of supportive supervision and self-presentation behaviours. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 54(4), 335–344.

18 | Devos, C., Boudrenghien, G., Van der Linden, N., Azzi, A., Frenay, M., Galand, B., et al. (2017). Doctoral students' experiences leading to completion or attrition: a matter of sense, progress and distress. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 32(1), 61–77.

20 | Ives, G., & Rowley, G. (2005). Supervisor selection or allocation and continuity of supervision: PhD students' progress and outcomes. *Studies in Higher Education*, 30(5), 535–555.

25 | Wright, T., & Cochrane, R. (2000). Factors influencing successful submission of PhD theses. *Studies in Higher Education*, 25(2), 181–195.

# What is good PhD supervision?

In response to the changing circumstances of PhD supervision, two questions have gained increasing international attention: How to define good PhD supervision? And which factors does this involve? For example, The Salzburg Recommendations of the European University Association (2005) offer a useful ethically-informed framework by suggesting that PhD supervision:

- is a long long-term commitment;
- needs to be based on fairness, respect and transparent agreements as the foundations of a good working culture; and
- exceeds merely providing instrumental support as PhD supervisors ought to help PhD students maintain focus and motivation.<sup>19</sup> |

A key prerequisite for successful PhD supervision is to devote continuous attention and interest to PhD students and their projects. This requires allocating sufficient time to this all-important task. Further, PhD students must be given enough time to work on their PhD projects. Hence, three years of full-time PhD studies and pursuing a PhD project are increasingly considered the norm for dissertations in the cultural, social and economic sciences. As PhD students often need to perform tasks not directly related to their PhD in order to fund their doctorate, PhD processes may last up to five years. While norms may vary considerably between disciplines and institutions, the complexity of the PhD process always calls for stringent management and guidance.

In this regard, the University of St.Gallen has set out a number of binding requirements for PhD supervisors:

- to advise PhD students appropriately on how to approach the coursework phase;
- to evaluate student progress and performance;
- to discuss evaluations with each student, in person and at regular intervals;
- to provide feedback.

Given these requirements, PhD supervisors need to answer various basic questions: What is appropriate advice? What are regular intervals? And how does one provide and organise good guidance, evaluation and feedback? In response to these questions, this brochure highlights some of the challenges of supervising PhD candidates. It offers practical advice for organising the PhD supervisory process so as to ensure that candidates and their academic work can thrive as best as possible.

<sup>19</sup> | European University Association. (2010). Salzburg II Recommendations: European universities' achievements since 2005 in implementing the Salzburg principles. Brussels: European University Association.

# PhD supervision recommendations

## **Ensure fair working conditions for internal PhD students**

“Internal PhD students” are employed at the University or at one of its institutes. PhD supervisors who employ PhD students automatically become their employer/superior and hence need to perform basic managerial and leadership duties. These include ensuring fair working conditions consistent with our University’s culture and with applicable employment laws (see page 26). Ensuring that PhD students are able to generate sufficient income to sustain a basic standard of living is important for both internal and external PhDs. Moreover, it is advisable to discuss their task portfolio and work-time issues at least *once a semester*. This ensures a balanced workload — between the PhD project and other duties — as well as any necessary rebalancing.

Documenting work times may provide greater clarity of the actual worktime effort. This in turn may serve as a basis for (re)negotiating workloads or overtime issues.

## **Use a PhD agreement to ensure transparency**

PhD agreements are widely acknowledged as a useful instrument for discussing and agreeing mutual expectations. They frame the PhD process, provide guidance and foster open communication about possible challenges. As such, they also help prevent potential interpersonal and structural tensions. As PhD processes hinge on multiple factors, using PhD agreements also requires individually configuring, discussing and regularly updating agreements.

The *central section* of this brochure contains various issues worth considering for inclusion in an agreement (see center). You may adapt the prototypical PhD agreement to your specific needs.

You may also download it here:

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

### **Sensitivity to critical developments and student well-being**

International studies report high PhD dropout rates across all disciplines.<sup>22</sup> The reasons are manifold and include significantly higher than normal stress levels, related psychological and psychosomatic symptoms as well as low work satisfaction.<sup>21</sup>

These potential factors require supervisors to develop a sensitivity to problematic developments. Being mindful of candidate well-being is crucial for providing early and preventive support in the event of personal struggles and crises. It is thus essential to track issues likely to cause poor performance or chaotic processes. Importantly, when high stress levels produce symptoms, encouraging PhD students to seek social or professional support is vital to help them reactivate their personal resources.

We also suggest bearing in mind that PhD students have different preconditions. Some may have specific physical or psychological needs. Others may have more family responsibilities than their peers. You can support these students by considering their specific circumstances (see pages 28 / 29).

### **Regular content feedback**

Regular supervision is essential for any PhD project. Principal PhD supervisors therefore ought to offer candidates feedback on their project (structure, content, empirics, etc.) at least *four times a year*.

Besides individual sessions, other good feedback opportunities include attending candidate presentations at conferences or research colloquia and offering written comments on drafts. Regardless of format, making PhD students aware of their responsibilities — to prepare for feedback sessions in advance and to summarise in writing their insights and learnings — helps to ensure well-documented processes.

<sup>21</sup> | Litalien, D., & Guay, F. (2015). Dropout intentions in PhD studies: A comprehensive model based on interpersonal relationships and motivational resources. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 41, 218–231.

<sup>22</sup> | Levecque, K., Anseel, F., De Beuckelaer, A., Van der Heyden, J., & Gisle, L. (2017). Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students. *Research Policy*.



### **Regular meetings to guide the PhD journey**

A seemingly simple but very important method for guiding PhD students during their journey is to arrange regular meetings. Helping PhD students map a favourable course of action, and deal with unforeseen challenges, is as important as engaging with their research content. A *first meeting* should take place within the first three months. It should clarify the basic aspects of working together and orient PhD students towards the various stages of the PhD process, including expectations about thesis content and quality.

Afterwards, a minimum of *two supervisory meetings a year* are mandatory. Regular process reviews allow making timely adjustments and help prevent disorientation or unnecessary detours. Importantly, candidates are responsible for preparing these twice-yearly reviews. These should cover their overall workload and their PhD project schedule.

We warmly encourage PhD supervisors who sense critical developments to convene such review meetings as required (i.e. outside the arranged meeting schedule).

### **Regular meetings to discuss work issues**

PhD supervisors should meet regularly with PhD students employed at their institute to discuss and document all relevant work issues. Such meetings should be kept *separate* from meetings dealing with the PhD project in order to avoid role conflicts. We recommend holding such a meeting during the first few workdays. Afterwards, PhD supervisors ought to hold a *yearly meeting* in form of an appraisal interview to consider contractual issues (work time, overtime, etc.), performance feedback, job satisfaction, necessary adjustments and future prospects.

# Untangling multiple roles

An ethically informed, reflexive approach to one's role and responsibilities as a PhD supervisor is an important prerequisite for providing quality PhD supervision. This includes establishing clear boundaries: What may be expected of PhD students? What may they expect of their supervisor? What sometimes complicates answering these questions is that supervisors are usually required to perform multiple roles vis-a-vis their candidates, with each role linked to specific tasks and duties. Role accumulation may create strong dependency since supervisors also become superiors, evaluators or co-authors (see table 1).

To avoid role conflicts, which occur whenever incompatible demands are made across different roles, *PhD supervisors are advised to consider the following preventive measures:*

- Establish clear boundaries between roles, e.g. by arranging separate appointments for different issues or by taking short breaks before discussing issues concerning another role.
- Anticipate and discuss potential role conflicts with the PhD student concerned.
- Define the different roles and the respective duties and responsibilities in an extended PhD agreement.
- Be aware that multiple roles may create multiple dependencies, which may lead to considerable insecurity in PhD students; also be aware that even incidental remarks or certain behaviour may intimidate PhD students.
- When in doubt about how best to avoid a role conflict, we recommend that you consult a colleague or seek support from one of the University's specialised services (see pages 28 / 29).
- Since PhD students depend on their supervisors, blurring private and professional boundaries may be inappropriate and be experienced as intimidating. Be sensitive to grooming behaviour and under all instances avoid sexist as well as inappropriate, sexualised remarks and behaviour towards PhD candidates. Refrain from engaging in romantic relationships with PhD students.

**Table 1 | Roles and possible role conflicts**

<b>Role of PhD supervisor</b>	<b>Main responsibility of the role</b>	<b>What can PhD candidates expect?</b>	<b>Potential challenges and role conflicts</b>
<b>Academic supervisor</b> <sup>1</sup>	Facilitate and guide candidate's academic development.	Interest, time and attention, in the form of regular meetings, helpful feedback and practical support of the research and working process.	Finding the right balance between commitment (yet without becoming overinvolved or overstretching one's resources) and detachment.
<b>Superior</b> <sup>4-12</sup>	Ensure quality of non-PhD work tasks	Fair financial compensation, time to recuperate according to employment regulations, developmental opportunities.	If the candidate is expected to demonstrate both academic and non-academic performance, and if time is scarce, confusion over priorities may rise. Professional short-term goals may also conflict with the long-term goal of completing the PhD.
<b>Co-author</b> <sup>3</sup>	To publish and support one's co-author as an academic peer	Authors will be mentioned in a sequence that reflects their contribution. Learning how to manage publication processes and understanding the publishing business. Supervisors are responsible for making the challenges of co-authorship explicit and are advised to reach an agreement with the PhD student concerned before starting to work on a joint paper.	Candidates may feel they have no choice other than to involve their supervisor to gain support for their PhD or to avoid conflict. However, co-authorship should be based on each author making a substantial contribution. According to the University's Code of Academic Integrity, a person is only eligible as an author if they have contributed conceptually, content-wise or empirically to a paper. Holding a management position, funding the project or supervision does not entitle supervisors to claim co-authorship. Thesis supervision does not per se constitute co-authorship.
<b>PhD examiner</b> <sup>1</sup>	Assess the quality of the pre-study and of the PhD thesis	Fair thesis assessment based on transparent criteria and feedback on thesis and grading decision.	Candidate's performance in non-PhD roles may lead to biased thesis assessment.

# Feedback: The heart of the PhD process

Feedback is crucial and omnipresent in academic life. Nevertheless, giving and receiving feedback poses a significant challenge, even for the most experienced supervisor. The following feedback guidance may help you improve both how you give and how you receive feedback.

**Table 2 | Giving helpful feedback**

<b>Fitting</b>	To be helpful, feedback needs to acknowledge the recipient's situation. It thus needs to be formulated comprehensibly and acceptably. When giving feedback, please ask yourself "Which kind of feedback might help this particular person in this particular situation."
<b>Be precise</b>	The more precise and concrete your feedback is, the better your counterpart can learn from you. Therefore, share your observations in detail before interpreting or assessing your counterpart's performance or before giving instructions. Moreover, substantiate your interpretations and avoid general evaluations (i.e. assessment not based on concrete observation or generalised characterisations of the person concerned).
<b>Be personal</b>	Use the first person singular ("I"), not the voice of general truth ("one" or "you"). Indicate that your feedback is based on your (well-informed, yet subjective) perspective. Emphasise that you are not claiming to speak for the general public.

**Table 3 | Actively receiving feedback**

<b>Be selective</b>	Please remember that feedback is subjective opinion, not the ultimate truth. Carefully consider what is helpful and right for you and select those aspects you find important.
<b>Orient yourself</b>	Be prepared and, if possible, tell the person offering feedback which kind of feedback would be helpful at this particular point in time.
<b>Listen actively</b>	Encourage your counterpart to share feedback by showing you are interested (i.e. adopt positive body language). Avoid defining and justifying yourself. If anything is unclear, seek clarification. At the end of the feedback, summarise the key points in your own words.

As Table 4 illustrates, there are various kinds of feedback. Each may fulfill a different function in the PhD process. While each form of feedback is important, evaluative feedback will tend to override other forms of feedback when given together.

**Table 4 | Three kinds of feedback** (inspired by <sup>24</sup>1)

	<b>Appreciative feedback</b>	<b>Developmental feedback</b>	<b>Evaluative feedback</b>
<b>Function / Aims</b>	This form of feedback aims to encourage, motivate and empower the recipient by strengthening developmental trajectories and by emphasising existing strengths.	This form of feedback helps identify areas of development and helps the recipient best allocate their attention and energy.	This form of feedback aims to help the recipient align expectations, make informed decisions and orient themselves both towards others and towards norms and conventions.
<b>Example</b>	“Your presentation was very well prepared and executed; the progress in your project is becoming more and more visible.”	“An important next step will be to make the argument in your literature section more coherent.”	“Considering the journal's standards, I believe your manuscript will be rejected in its present shape and form.”

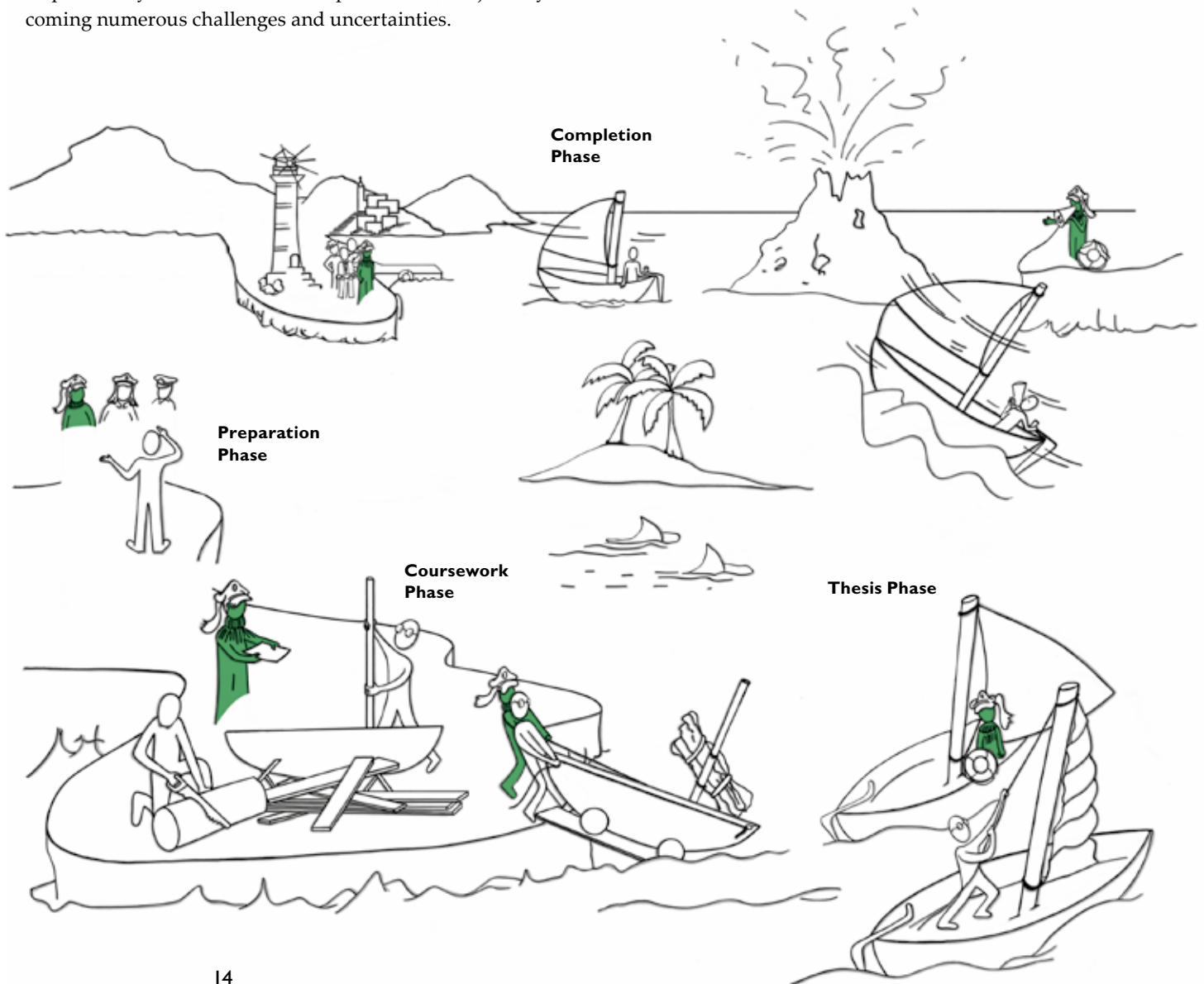
*Consider asking yourself:*

- Which kind of feedback is going to help this particular PhD candidate most in the current phase of their PhD?
- How can I communicate with the recipient which kind of feedback might benefit them most at a particular point in time?

<sup>24</sup>1 | Stone, D., & Heen, S. (2014). *Thanks for the science and art of receiving feedback well* (even when it is off base, unfair, poorly delivered, and frankly, you're not in the mood). New York: Viking.

# The shared PhD journey

The PhD student and PhD supervisor share a common journey with a shared responsibility until a PhD thesis is published. This journey often involves overcoming numerous challenges and uncertainties.



# PREPARATION PHASE

## Ensure the necessary resources

For PhD supervisors, accepting a new PhD student involves a long-term commitment. This includes providing a number of resources. Deciding whether to take on a new PhD student requires carefully considering whether the necessary resources are available.

**Motivation** | Am I able and willing to support this PhD student for the next three to five years?

**Time** | How much time is needed to adequately supervise a new PhD student? Am I able and willing to invest this time for the entire PhD process?

**Funding** | Am I able to adequately fund an internal PhD student for the next few years, so that he or she will have enough time to complete their project?

**Space** | Am I able to provide the PhD student with adequate work space and professional conditions?

**Possible bias** | How diverse is my team? Am I subconsciously choosing PhD candidates on the basis of gender or ethnicity? Would it be helpful to find PhD students with a different background to gain new perspectives?

## Define the PhD position

When hiring a PhD student or taking on an external PhD student, supervisors are advised to define their expectations about the PhD project and the PhD position prior to initiating the recruitment process. Expectations should be clearly stated in the corresponding job advertisement. Clear expectations also help potential PhD students make an informed decision about applying for a vacancy.

### *Expectations about the PhD project*

- Is the project oriented towards an academic career or not?
- How much scope does the PhD student have in reshaping his or her project?
- What are the project's expected academic outcomes?

### *Expectations about internal PhD positions*

- Which tasks are PhD students expected to fulfil as part of their job contract?
- Which tasks are considered part of work time? And which not?
- How much annual work time (approximately) is earmarked for each task?
- What is the balance between working on the PhD and on other tasks?

### *Considerations about external PhD positions*

- What are the risks of accepting external (freelance) PhD students?
- How much time will the PhD student be able to dedicate to doctoral work?
- How might an external PhD student be regularly integrated into our internal research network?

# RECRUITMENT PHASE

Besides finding the most suitable candidate, the recruitment process also serves (and needs) to establish how likely appointees will be able to complete their PhD. Carefully selecting PhD candidates is one of the most important instruments available to PhD supervisors for ensuring a good fit between candidates and vacant positions. Sincere and critical appraisal of candidate aptitude already early on is crucial to preventing failure.

## *Questions to consider in the job interview*

- How has the candidate dealt with previous writing projects?
- To what extent does the candidate need to acquire additional knowledge and skills before being able to develop a viable PhD project?
- Which coping resources will the candidate be able to activate during difficult phases? How good is he or she at asking for support?

## **Work samples**

It is useful to invite candidates to discuss a text, prepare a short presentation or share a writing sample to gauge how they approach and perform academic tasks.

## **Project outline**

The specific academic requirements and steps for completing a doctorate should be specified during the recruitment process. If the topic of the PhD project is predefined, it is important to make candidates aware of their academic autonomy.

## **Project proposal**

Supervisors should openly communicate their expectations about the intermediary steps needed to complete a PhD process already in the recruitment phase. Such open communication allows establishing structures capable of identifying challenges early in the process. This may require building additional skills or even lead to early withdrawal.

## **Trial period**

It is also legitimate to suggest a longer trial period (up to one year) to enable supervisors and students to decide whether pursuing a PhD will bear fruit. This period might be used to prepare a project proposal and to outline a rough schedule. When using this option, a clear structure, intermediary steps and comprehensible goals should be defined in advance so as to avoid uncertainties about requirements.

## **Confirmation of supervision**

Confirmation of supervision is not a mere formality. It represents an obligation towards the University and towards the PhD student. Withdrawing from this commitment requires giving important reasons.





### **Negotiate conditions and expectations**

Discussing mutual expectations at an early stage, if possible before signing a job contract, helps avoid disappointment and conflict. Explicitly discussing expectations is key to building good supervisor-student rapport. We suggest adopting the PhD agreement provided in this brochure as a basis for discussion.

#### *What to clarify before signing a job contract*

- What is considered work time?
- How will overtime be compensated?
- What does the contractually stipulated workload (e.g. 70%) mean in practice?
- How far is the position oriented towards basic or applied research?
- How much paid time may candidates devote to their PhD?
- What kind of support will the PhD supervisor provide?

## COURSEWORK PHASE

Early orientation and academic socialisation are crucial to the overall PhD process. A structured and in-depth induction to their role and responsibilities enables PhD students to understand which skills they will need to develop to successfully pursue their PhD thesis and to adhere to their project plan. Early orientation can prevent unnecessary frustration and maladjustments, which often only emerge later. By the end of the coursework phase, candidates ought to know what they need to achieve to successfully complete their PhD studies. A lack of clarity may lead to heightened anxiety, perfectionism and the inability to see the project through to completion.

Considering the following aspects proves helpful:

- Outlining a developmental plan, including specific intermediary steps and milestones.
- Discussing which skills and competencies need to be developed during the PhD process and how best to build these resources.
- Motivating candidates to establish their own network.
- Encouraging candidates to engage in academic networks and introducing them to the scientific community relevant to their project. This also means that supervisors are no longer solely responsible for providing feedback. Moreover, contact with and integration into a scientific community can strengthen and motivate candidates.



# PREPARING THE RESEARCH PROPOSAL

The research proposal aims to demonstrate the feasibility of the envisaged research. It also provides a project roadmap and thus marks an important milestone in the PhD process. Preparing a research proposal is an important step in the socialisation of PhD students. This stage helps them understand how and under which conditions they can best complete the PhD process. It is therefore strongly advisable to discuss the criteria for reviewing research proposals early on. PhD supervisors ought to clearly communicate the criteria used to assess student progression and project feasibility.

Various questions and issues requiring agreement between PhD students and their supervisors need to be addressed:

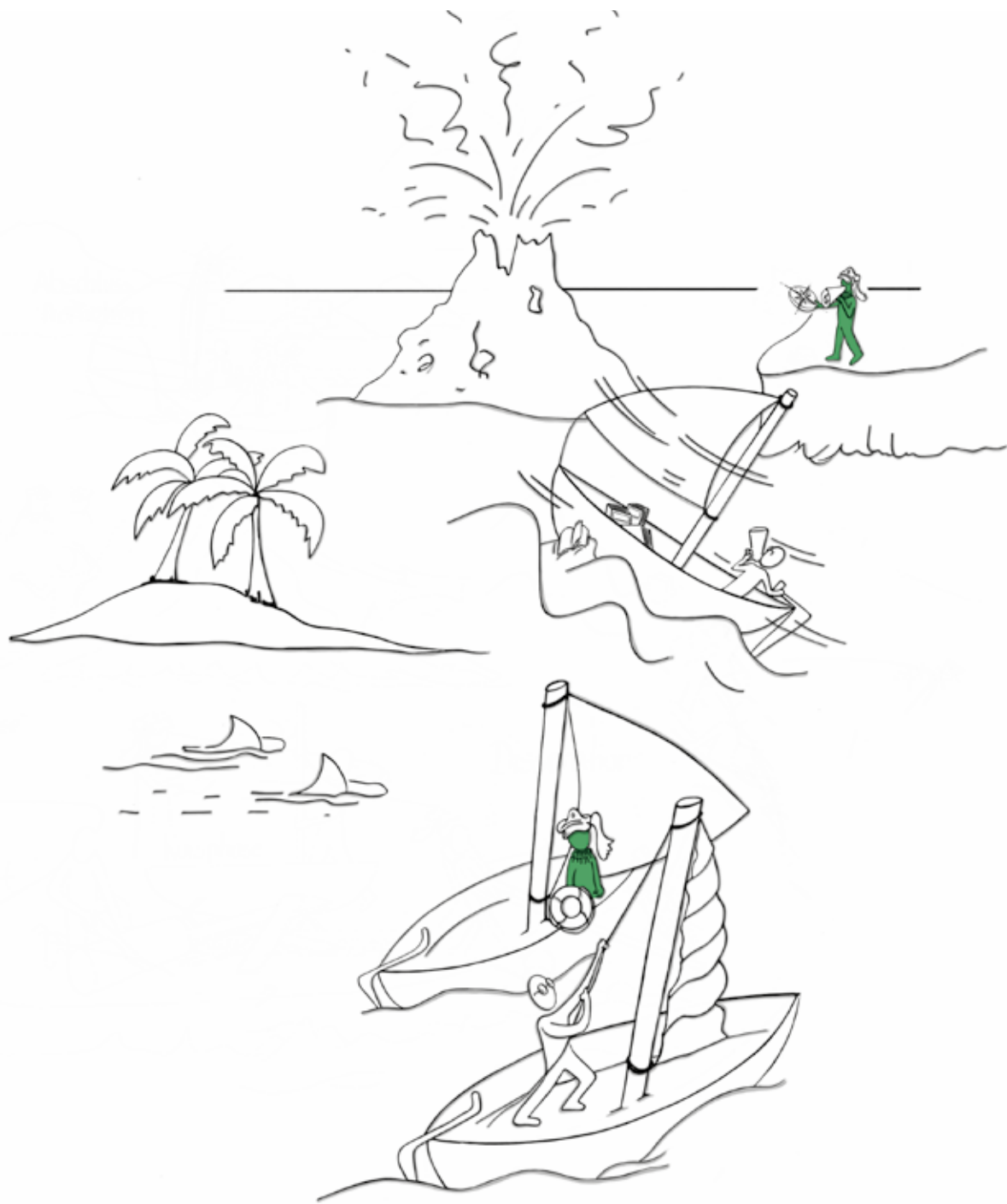
- Which concrete assessment criteria exist in the discipline? What are the minimum standards and best practices for research proposals and PhD theses?
- It is important to provide relevant examples of good research proposals in the discipline (e.g. content and structural requirements, quality criteria, etc.).
- Will the envisaged outcome be a monograph or a cumulative thesis? Which publication requirements exist (e.g. preferred outlets)?
- Which criteria apply to co-authored publications?
- Discuss the process for appointing a co-supervisor or a committee of supervisors. Request co-supervisors to explain how they wish to be involved in the process.

The primary purpose of the research proposal is to structure the further course of the thesis. By accepting the research proposal, the supervisor indicates that he or she believes that the thesis will be successful. At the same time, the research proposal is often the last opportunity to tell a PhD student that he or she will not manage to complete the dissertation. Supervisors may return research proposals for review or reject them definitively.

## THESIS PHASE

Defending the research proposal marks the transition to a more autonomous phase of the PhD process. In this stage, candidates need to deepen their research interests, collect and analyse data, and develop their own perspective and expertise. One of the common challenges facing candidates in the thesis phase is to transpose their ideas, insights and contributions into coherent writing, and to test their ideas beyond institutional confines. As a rule, this means that supervisors will now follow rather than guide candidates on their further journey. While PhD candidates may generally need less orientation than other students, this does not mean that supervision becomes superfluous. On the contrary, many PhD students struggle with the complexity of their field and with the many decisions (small and large) they need to take along the way. Thus, supervisors should be readily accessible in this phase, to help candidates consider their decisions, make sense of and organise their insights and overcome unforeseen obstacles and struggles.

Generally, supervisors may encourage PhD candidates to make good use of PhD colloquia, where they will receive feedback on their analysis or written work. Other methods that help candidates structure their work include preparing commented outlines of their thesis, drafting executive summaries or giving elevator pitches about their contributions to research. Establishing supervisor-candidate interaction best described as “freedom within boundaries” is thus an important step in this phase of the PhD process.



**Stagnation**

Concerns that a candidate is struggling to progress his or her project should be addressed sooner rather than later. While the fear of further demotivating candidates may impede discussion, voicing one's concerns is often the better option. It enables supervisors and candidates to jointly develop a problem solving strategy and to implement corrective measures in a timely manner. For example, when procrastination, due to feeling overwhelmed or guilty, thwarts development, a clear and fine-grained plan including manageable deadlines, as well as professional counselling, may help reassure candidates of the feasibility of their project.

Moreover, if improvements are not sufficiently evident over a longer period, terminating the project may prevent a drawn-out struggle with unsatisfactory outcomes.

**Perfectionism and over-ambition**

Perfectionism and over-ambition in PhD students may deteriorate resources and lead to frustration. Supervisors may help candidates counter — and overcome — such negative developments by adopting a pragmatic approach, by giving developmental rather than evaluative feedback (see table 2, page 13) and by fostering a culture of sharing drafts and preliminary versions in a sheltered atmosphere.

**Insufficiently incorporating feedback**

Feedback, even when delivered in the most appreciative way, may be hard to accept and may trigger strong defensiveness. As feedback is paramount to academic socialisation, it may jeopardise project development. In such cases, PhD supervisors should consider discussing with candidates how best to share critical feedback, i.e. for the benefit of further progress. It may also be important to underline the importance of learning to cope with critical and even with poorly delivered feedback.

**Isolation and unresponsiveness**

While things may seem to be going well, not hearing from candidates for a sustained period of time may suggest difficulties. A candidate may be struggling emotionally, be going through a difficult time in his or her life, have writer's block or be facing an impasse — reasons enough to feel ashamed or, even worse, not to seek help. Encouraging PhD students to activate their social networks and to seek support in such situations is key to promoting well-being in academic life.

**Counselling**

The University offers various counselling services (see pages 28 / 29). These provide students and supervisors with expert support in difficult situations. In case of doubt, it is important to access these services as resources — sooner rather than later.

## COMPLETION PHASE

PhD students often experience the final stage of their project as requiring considerable energy for writing, reworking and editing their thesis.



## **As a PhD supervisor, consider supporting candidates in the following ways:**

### **Help find time to write**

Finalising a PhD often requires building up momentum and focus. One important prerequisite is to give PhD students enough time and space to immerse themselves in this final stage. Supervisors may ease the burden on candidates, for instance, by renegotiating workloads or by temporarily relieving them of certain duties.

### **Help see the big picture**

Another common problem for PhD students at this stage is recognising the value of their contributions. This sometimes proves difficult as they have already been involved in the project for a considerable time. When giving feedback, highlighting contributions rather than focusing on developmental issues may help candidates once again establish an external perspective on their thesis.

### **Help see the end**

Given the scope of PhD projects, candidates may struggle to realise when their thesis is ready for submission. Crucial support at this stage involves providing “ready-to-submit” criteria and helping candidates identify parts or sections of their thesis that may be safely omitted.

### **Help understand the editing process**

Finally, planning the final steps may require supervisors to provide appropriate guidance. It helps candidates greatly if supervisors clearly establish if, how and when they are willing to read and comment on draft chapters. It is also important to tell candidates how long this is likely to take. Throughout, being clear about official procedures and deadlines is equally crucial.

### **Finishing and a new beginning**

When candidates submit their thesis, supervisors face a new challenge: They now need to step out of their supervisory role and transition into their role as examiners. This may prove challenging after a long process of supervision, leadership, (in some cases) co-authorship and the development of personal familiarity. Following the defined institutional process for thesis evaluation and PhD colloquia helps formalise this phase and facilitates candidate examination and grading.

When PhD students defend their dissertation, their written work has already been accepted. At the official defence, candidates demonstrate their command of their subject. The defence is public and candidates are welcome to invite their peers, mentors, friends and family.

After completing the official process, PhD students often need to consider their next career steps. In this stage, thoughtful acknowledgment of one’s former PhD student’s academic potential and professional skills may be greatly appreciated, as well as prove important for a graduate’s further decision process.

Project conclusion offers supervisors and candidates the opportunity to look back on the process. In the rare event of a negative PhD decision, this will most likely reflect negative and conflictual dynamics during the process. Sharing views and experiences during the journey contributes to avoiding such situations in future. Even in the much more likely event of a positive decision, supervisors may consider asking candidates how they experienced their supervision.



Given the complex nature of PhD supervision, learning and improving one's capacity to support PhD processes will be a continuous undertaking throughout a supervisor's academic career.

Finally and most importantly, a completed PhD is a reason for celebration. Earning a PhD is often strenuous, so that organising and participating in celebrations or festivities emphasises the value of a positive and appreciative workplace culture based on mutual trust and respect. Celebrations also offer supervisors the opportunity to take pride in having supported a candidate in their scientific and personal development and in gaining insights for the benefit of science and practice. Completing a shared journey spanning several years deserves celebratory acknowledgement. Hence, supervisors are encouraged to attend their candidates' PhD degree ceremony.

# Guidelines and References

## **Guidelines and regulations of the University of St.Gallen**

This list is not exhaustive. If you require the relevant information in English, please contact the responsible University officials directly.

### **PhD-related guidelines**

- <sup>1</sup> | Award Regulations for Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) of the University of St.Gallen (PromO17)
- <sup>2</sup> | Implementation Provisions for the Award Regulations for Doctors's Degrees of the University of St.Gallen
- <sup>3</sup> | Code of academic integrity of the University of St.Gallen

### **Work contract guidelines (only available in German)**

- <sup>4</sup> | Personalreglement der Universität St.Gallen
- <sup>5</sup> | Ausführungsbestimmungen zum Personalreglement
- <sup>5</sup> | Weisung des Rektors zur Umsetzung des Personalreglements
- <sup>7</sup> | Merkblatt Ruhetage, Ferien, Urlaub
- <sup>8</sup> | Regelung Mutterschaft & Regelung Vaterschaft
- <sup>9</sup> | Allgemeine Bestimmungen für Assistierende
- <sup>10</sup> | Merkblatt Entstehung und Beendigung des Arbeitsverhältnisses
- <sup>11</sup> | Personalgesetz des Kantons St.Gallen
- <sup>12</sup> | Personalverordnung des Kantons St.Gallen

### **Dealing with problematic situations**

- <sup>13</sup> | Brochure on the protection of personal integrity
- <sup>14</sup> | Information about advice in difficult situations
- <sup>15</sup> | Reglement über die Schlichtungsverfahren der Universität St.Gallen

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# Counselling and Support Services

## **Counselling and Psychological Services**

[Girtannerstrasse 6, 9000 St.Gallen, tel. +41 71 224 26 39; \[counselling@unisg.ch\]\(mailto:counselling@unisg.ch\)](#)

The University's psychological counsellors provide a confidential and sheltered space for PhD students or supervisors to discuss individual concerns or issues. Our team also offers support with finding individual solutions while knowing the specific context of the HSG in-depth.

## **Diversity & Inclusion**

[Rosenbergstrasse 51, 9000 St.Gallen, tel. +41 71 224 22 44, \[chancengleichheit@unisg.ch\]\(mailto:chancengleichheit@unisg.ch\)](#)

The Diversity & Inclusion Team provides all University members with independent and confidential advice. Team members have no mediating role but provide information and support and can point out opportunities.

## **Grants Office**

[Tellstrasse 2, 9000 St.Gallen, tel. +41 71 224 78 09, \[research@unisg.ch\]\(mailto:research@unisg.ch\)](#)

The Grants Office helps junior researchers secure funding for their research.

## **Human Resources Development**

[Dufourstrasse 50, 9000 St.Gallen, tel. +41 71 224 35 39, \[hrm@unisg.ch\]\(mailto:hrm@unisg.ch\)](#)

The University's HR consultants provide confidential advice and, with your consent, conflict mediation. They are obliged to protect you and your health. If anyone violates applicable law, our consultants are required to investigate the matter and, under certain circumstances, may no longer be able to treat your information confidentially.

## **Non-tenured faculty organisation**

[Girtannerstr. 8, 9000 St.Gallen, tel. +41 71 224 30 84, \[mittelbau@unisg.ch\]\(mailto:mittelbau@unisg.ch\)](#)

The non-tenured faculty organisation represents the interests of lecturers, junior lecturers, associate lecturers, as well as assistant staff and researchers in the context of the University's academic self-administration.

### **Ombudsman's Office**

[ombudsstelle@unisg.ch](mailto:ombudsstelle@unisg.ch)

The Ombudsman's Office is a confidential and independent arbitration board. It aims to promote trust among University members, to mediate in the event of conflicts and to resolve conflicts in an informal way.

### **PhD Office**

[Tellstrasse 2, 9000 St.Gallen, tel. +41 71 224 22 20, phd@unisg.ch](mailto:phd@unisg.ch)

The PhD Office provides administrative information on all issues pertaining to doctoral studies. It is also available to answer questions about pursuing PhD studies at the HSG.

### **Whistleblowing Office**

[Oberer Graben 46, 9000 St.Gallen, +41 79 632 1434, see intranet for further information](mailto:whistleblowing@unisg.ch)

The external «Whistleblowing Office» is available as a contact point for violations of laws, regulations, duty of care and other illegal acts or unfair conduct, especially if support from other (HSG-internal) services does not seem feasible. This includes, for example, conflicts of interest, offences against property, violations of data protection as well as scientific and personal misconduct.

### **Writing Lab**

[Unterer Graben 21, 9000 St.Gallen, tel. +41 71 224 2886, schreiben@unisg.ch](mailto:schreiben@unisg.ch)

The HSG Writing Lab offers coaching, advice and professional support for students and their individual writing processes at all academic levels.

### **Young Investigator Programme (YIP)**

[Tellstrasse 2, 9000 St.Gallen, tel. +41 71 224 2152, yip@unisg.ch](mailto:yip@unisg.ch)

The YIP supports young researchers in developing interdisciplinary competencies, in familiarising themselves with the academic system, and in tackling questions and resolving conflicts that may arise in connection with the qualification process and career planning.

# 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?

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