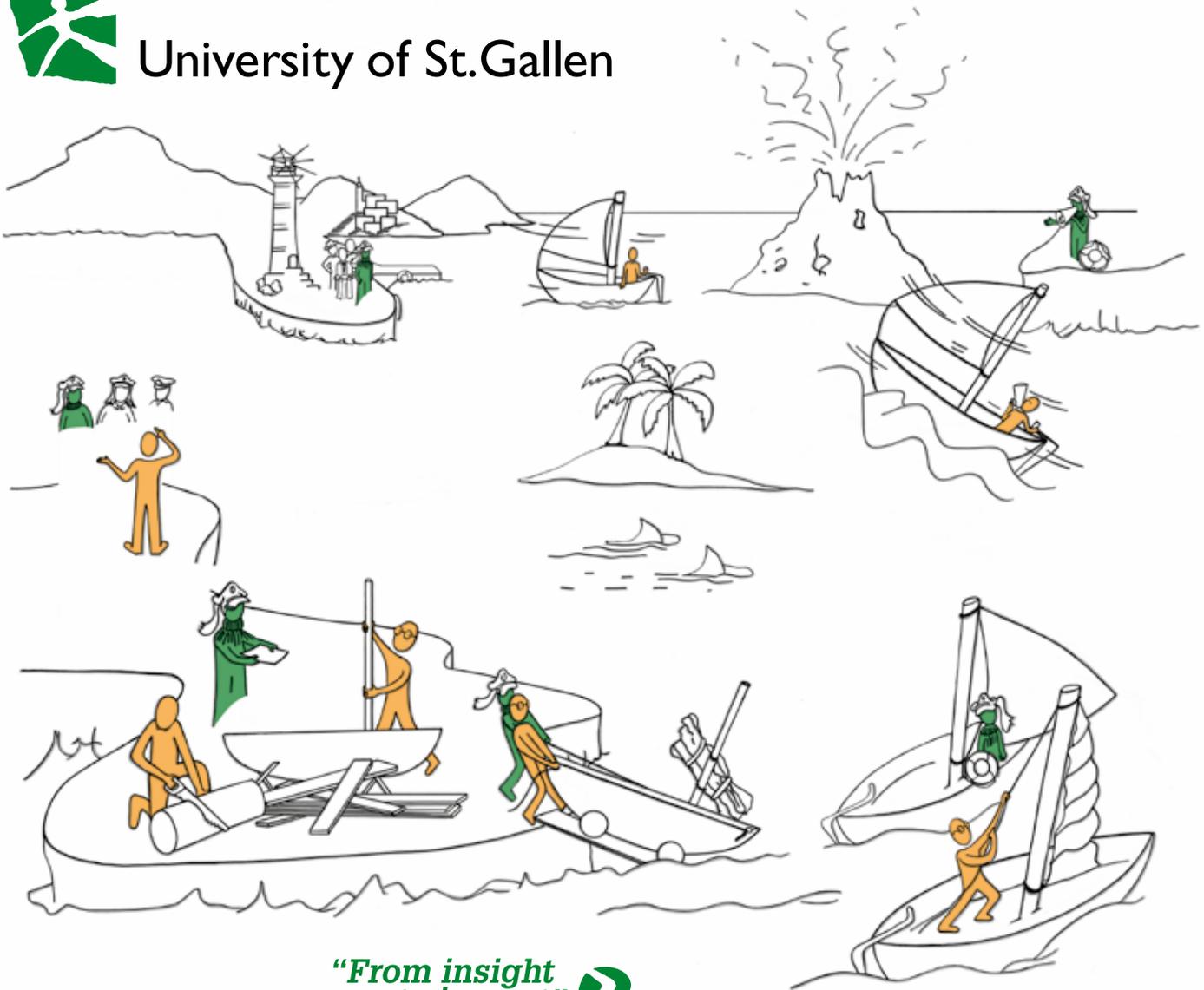




University of St.Gallen



*“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 28).

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 students

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. These developments have undoubtedly made pursuing doctoral studies also more complex. Doing a PhD means learning how to manage a complex academic project, how to balance different responsibilities and how to establish supportive social networks.

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.²⁵ In contrast, poor work relations may negatively impact a candidate's well-being or even lead to interrupting the doctoral project.¹⁷ ¹⁸ ²⁰

Thus, doctoral students need to carefully consider how best to organise themselves and how to establish good rapport with their supervisors as the basis of an effective and empowering PhD process 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.

Actively shaping your PhD

Situated at the intersection between education and research, a doctorate qualifies candidates for research-based professions and enables them to take on diverse high-level responsibilities and functions.²⁶ The theoretical, methodological and social skills acquired during the PhD process open up interesting paths, such as translating research-based insights into problem solving strategies benefitting practice or even society as a whole. And yet, earning a doctorate requires long-term commitment, during which candidates need to activate significant personal and social resources. Three years of full-time PhD work are increasingly considered the norm in the economic, cultural and social sciences.¹⁹ 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.

Doctoral candidates are early-stage researchers as well as young professionals striving to “make a key contribution to the creation of new knowledge.”¹⁹ At the same time, PhD students are also new to academic practices and processes. This requires them to learn the specifics of their research field and to build various broader skills:

- Finding, reviewing, discussing and ordering large fields of knowledge, as well as taking position.
- Deciding which activities to prioritise.
- Balancing independent academic work and actively seeking social and instrumental support.
- Dealing with project phases in which developing solutions may take ample time, which in turn requires opening up space for creative thinking but also reviewing existing approaches.
- Building networks in which to share one’s work and receive feedback.

Throughout the PhD process, a central frame of reference is one’s immediate academic network, in which one’s PhD supervisor is a key figure. Given the importance of this relationship, the University of St.Gallen has formulated a number of basic rights and responsibilities for PhD students:

- PhD students are entitled to appropriate supervision for the entire duration of their PhD programme;
- PhD students are obliged to inform their supervisor of any significant changes to their thesis. They are also required to regularly meet and discuss their work with their supervisor;
- PhD students are responsible for respecting agreed work schedules and deadlines.

This brochure highlights some of the challenges of writing a PhD and offers practical advice for organising the PhD process in order to ensure that candidates and their academic work can thrive as best as possible.

¹⁹ | European University Association. (2010). Salzburg II Recommendations: European universities’ achievements since 2005 in implementing the Salzburg principles. Brussels: European University Association.

²⁶ | Rectors’ Conferences of the Swiss Universities. (2015). Excellence through Research: Joint Position Paper by the Swiss Universities on the Doctorate. Bern: CRUS.

Actively organising your PhD process: Recommended practices

Activate social and personal resources

Aside from the intellectual challenge of writing a PhD, establishing a sustainable and satisfying work process is key to success. As a doctorate often involves working on your own for longer periods, during which immediate outcomes and progress may not be immediately apparent, it is crucial you stay motivated, strike a good balance between work and recreation and maintain positive social relationships. And when work just seems neverending, it is imperative you balance your workload and keep in good spirits and health.

PhD agreement

PhD agreements are widely acknowledged as very useful for agreeing shared expectations. Such agreements 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, discussing and *updating your PhD agreement once a year* may help structure the next steps. We advise PhD students to take the initiative and to actively promote the use of a PhD agreement. The central section of this brochure contains a model agreement, which you may adapt to your specific needs.

You may also download it here:

► www.opsy.unisg.ch/en/counselling/PhDjourney.

Know the rules, your rights and responsibilities

Enrolling as a PhD student at the University of St.Gallen subjects you to numerous regulations (e.g. Award Regulations for Doctoral Degrees and the Code of Academic Integrity). Moreover, if you are employed by the University, you will also be subject to the rules of the Personalgesetz & Personalverordnung des Kantons St.Gallen (Cantonal Employment Regulations) and the Allgemeine Bestimmungen für Assistenten (General Provisions for University Assistants). Familiarising yourself with these rules and provisions is your responsibility and helps you better understand your rights and obligations. When in doubt, we advise you to consult one of the University's counselling services (see page 30 / 31). We also recommend that you familiarise yourself with the University's other services.

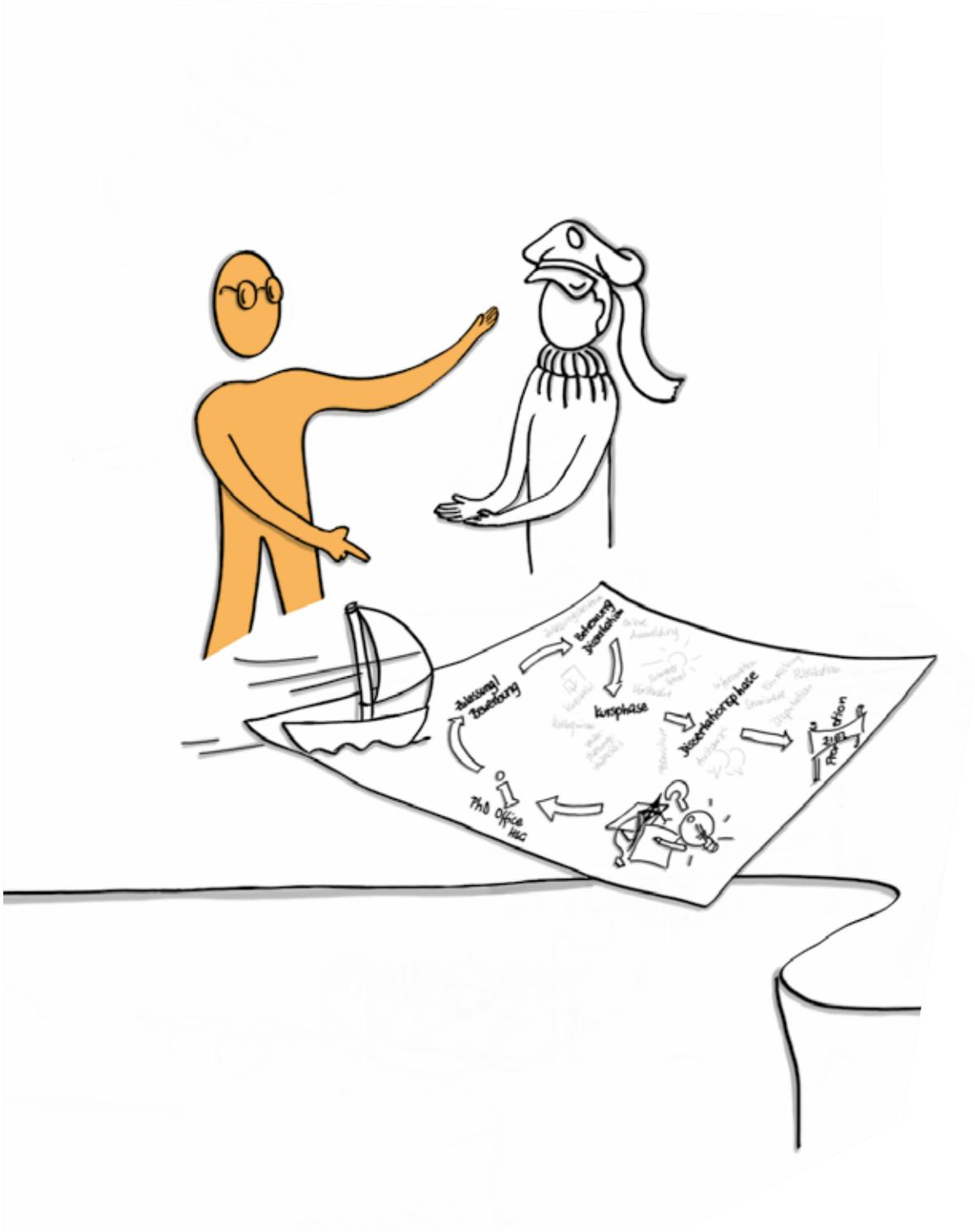
Regular updates on academic progress

For your PhD supervisor to help you develop your thesis, he or she needs to monitor your progression. As a rule of thumb, you ought to present your work at least *four times a year*. Besides personal supervision, research colloquia and conferences are good formats for receiving feedback. If you intend to give a talk or presentation, we encourage you to involve your supervisor as early as possible in your planning. This means proactively scheduling a meeting with your supervisor or informing him or her about your plans. You may even send along your presentation for review. Importantly, be sure to carefully prepare your meetings and presentations. After the meeting, prepare a written summary of the key points to enable feedback and future discussion on your progress.

Keep track of your process

The complexity of the PhD process requires careful tracking and thoughtful planning. Importantly, you need to update (at least *once a semester*) your PhD supervisor on your ongoing plans and further steps. This also includes telling your supervisor which forms of support you need. You are your supervisor's best guide in this respect. As other tasks may change your time plan, you will need to update your supervisor on schedule adjustments. This helps ensure transparency. Be sure to stay in touch with your supervisor, not only about your progress, but also about any unforeseen difficulties.

Documenting your worktime effort may provide greater clarity. This in turn may serve as a basis for (re)negotiating your workload or any overtime issues.



Untangling multiple roles

PhD students, especially when employed at their supervisor's institute, often perform multiple roles during their doctoral studies. Each role may involve specific requirements, skills, tasks and responsibilities. Your roles may also change your formal relationship with your supervisor. This may cause role confusion and sometimes even role conflicts. Hence, be aware of your different roles and consider their boundaries.

To avoid role conflicts, which incompatible demands across different roles are likely to create, we advise you to consider the following preventive steps:

- **Be transparent** | It is important you anticipate and discuss potential role conflicts with your supervisor. Addressing and helping clarify conflicts or tensions is a mutual endeavour, one which we suggest you take into your own hands. Take any dissatisfaction or worries seriously and openly raise them with your supervisor (instead of conveying them indirectly, or only to others). You cannot assume that your supervisor will be aware of your feelings, so give him or her the chance to react to your concerns and to help you resolve matters.
- **Agreement** | Make your different roles (and your respective rights and responsibilities) part of an extended PhD agreement.
- **Negotiate** | Knowing and standing up for your rights is an important part of negotiating a workable solution with your supervisor. While this requires good preparation and some courage, it is an important step in emancipating yourself as a young academic.
- **Boundaries** | Draw clear boundaries between your roles, e.g. by allocating separate issues to separate meetings, or by taking a short break before moving on to issues concerning one of your other roles. Moreover, do not engage in intimate or romantic relationships with your supervisor.
- **Feedback** | Request specific feedback on your different roles by preparing specific questions and by indicating your willingness to listen to feedback.

Table 5 | Roles and possible role conflicts

Roles of PhD students	Main responsibility of the role	What can PhD supervisors expect?	Potential challenges and role conflicts
PhD student ¹	Organise, develop and execute thesis	Interest, time and effort to build academic skills as well as actively develop their thesis. Regular progress updates and discussion of critical issues. Organise well-prepared supervision meetings. Respect supervisor's time and agreed deadlines.	Finding the right balance between working independently on the PhD and asking for support/sharing developments.
Employee ⁴⁻¹³	Deliver quality non-PhD work tasks	Take responsibility for assigned tasks and fulfil these as best as possible. Signal limits, challenges and paths for development as early as possible to enable one's superior to organise appropriate action.	If the candidate is expected to demonstrate both academic and non-academic performance, and if time is scarce, confusion over priorities may arise. Professional short-term goals may also conflict with the long-term goal of completing the PhD.
Co-author ³	Publish and learn to publish	Authors will be mentioned in a sequence that fairly reflects their contribution. Learning how to manage publication processes and understanding the publishing business.	Candidates may feel they have no choice other than to add their supervisor as a co-author to gain support for their PhD or to avoid conflict, even though the supervisor made no substantial contribution to the paper.
Examination candidate ¹	Meet quality requirements of project proposal and PhD thesis	Candidate is familiar with the assessment criteria. Takes feedback on thesis development and the supervisor's grading decision seriously.	The candidate's performance in non-PhD roles may lead to (fears of) 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. When you receive feedback, actively identify those parts best suited to progressing your project. Avoid taking feedback too personally. Bearing in mind that whatever comments you receive concern your project will help you embrace what you perceive as supportive. This also helps prevent emotional (over-)reactions. Focusing on substance provides the necessary distance to advance your project. The following feedback guidance may help you improve both how you give and how you receive feedback.

Table 2 | Giving helpful feedback

Fitting	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."
Be precise	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).
Be personal	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

Be selective	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.
Orient yourself	Be prepared and, if possible, tell the person offering feedback which kind of feedback would be helpful at this particular point in time.
Listen actively	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.

Giving and taking different kinds of feedback

Receiving feedback may be difficult for various reasons: It might be delivered insensitively; it might not be the feedback you need (or were hoping for); it might be critical) or it might simply be the wrong point in time. Nevertheless, integrating feedback into your academic project is crucial for your further progress and growth.

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 ²⁴)

	Appreciative feedback	Developmental feedback	Evaluative feedback
Function / Aims	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.
Example	“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.”

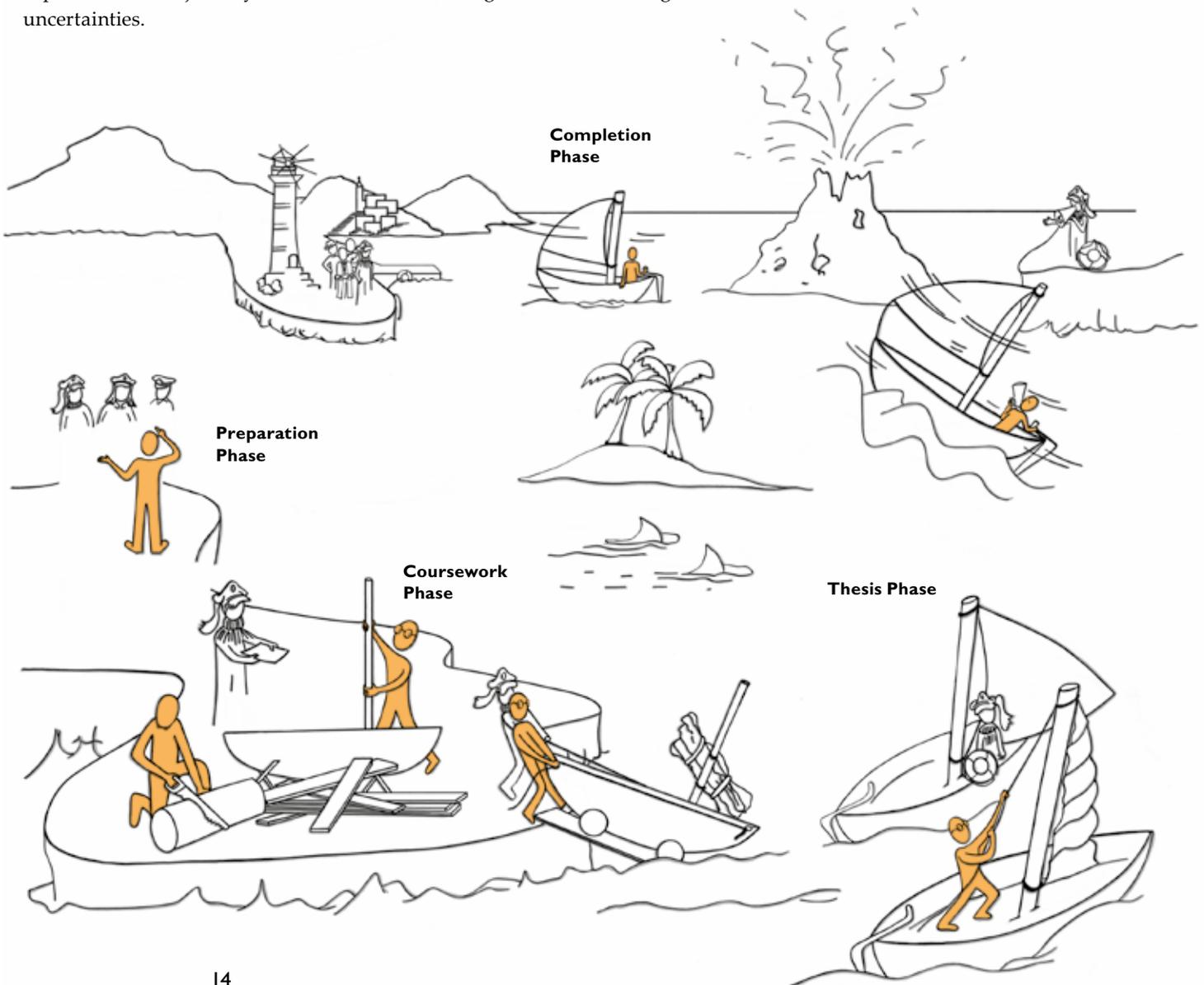
Consider asking yourself:

- Which kind of feedback is going to help me in the current phase of my PhD?
- How can I communicate clearly what kind of feedback I would like to receive?
- How can I deal with unhelpful feedback in a constructive way?

²⁴ | 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

PhD students and their supervisors share a common journey until a PhD thesis is published. This journey often involves overcoming numerous challenges and uncertainties.



PREPARATION PHASE

A PhD project is a long-term commitment. To make an informed decision whether or not to embark on this journey, you will need to carefully consider your motivation and resources. You will need both in abundance!

Understand your motivation

It is imperative that you establish your reasons for doing a PhD because some may prove less sustainable than others. Intrinsic motivators are more conducive to success than external ones: the desire to learn, genuine curiosity about a research topic, enjoying academic activities (e.g. reading, writing, reworking texts or getting feedback), feeling strongly about a social problem and striving to find solutions, as well as seeking a profound intellectual challenge. While extrinsic motivators (e.g. earning a PhD for career purposes, lacking other options or impressing one's parents or professors) are also legitimate — they are not enough without intrinsic ones.

Consider these questions:

- Whose idea was it for me to do a doctorate?
- Does my motivation justify the time and effort needed?
- How else might I pursue my ambitions and motivations?

Anticipating necessary resources

Your second step is to develop a realistic idea of what doing a doctorate in your chosen field involves. This will help you find out if you are able to activate the intellectual, personal and social resources needed to pursue and complete a PhD process.

Time

- How much time will doing a PhD in this field require?
- Am I able and willing to invest this time during the entire PhD process?
- What would it mean if my PhD took longer than envisaged (e.g. the full five years)?
- How old will I be when I earn my doctorate? What does this mean for my professional opportunities?
- Which other responsibilities do I need or want to fulfil during my PhD (e.g. family responsibilities)?

Funding

- Which living expenses plus PhD-related costs (travel costs, matriculation costs, publishing costs, etc.) will I be facing?
- How will I fund my PhD?
- Am I willing to accept the financial constraints of holding a PhD position?
- What will doing a PhD mean for my standard of living?

Sustainable self-leadership

- Can I work independently, organise my ideas and adhere to a work plan and timetable?
- Which coping strategies will I be able to activate during difficult periods?
How easily do I find asking for support?

Fitting the PhD position

Before applying for a PhD position, candidates are advised to define their expectations about their envisaged PhD project and their prospective PhD position. Clear expectations on both sides help take an informed decision about whether “you fit the bill.”

Expectations about the PhD project

- Will I be able to define my own research topic? Or will my doctorate be part of a larger project?
- How much scope do I have (and will I need) to reshape my project?
- How much interest and support do I expect from my supervisor?
- Is my doctorate oriented towards an academic career or towards practice?
- Do the expected project outcomes match my aims?

Expectations about the PhD position (internal PhDs)

- Which tasks will I be expected to perform as part of my contract? Am I genuinely interested in those tasks?
- How much work time (approximately) per year is earmarked for each task? Is this how I expect to be spending my time?
- How will working on my PhD and on other tasks be balanced? How feasible is this balance?
- How much flexibility and freedom do I need?
- Do I understand my professor’s working style? How well does it match mine?

Expectations about the PhD position (external PhDs)

- How compatible is my job with academic work? Will I have enough time?
- Is part-time work possible if necessary?
- How much does my employer support my goal of doing a doctorate?
- How can I find my academic peer group or network?
- If I am not employed, how else will I fund my PhD?

APPLICATION PHASE

During the recruitment process, we advise candidates to check which resources are available at their future institute to support PhD processes. How far do you and your prospective supervisor consider the existing conditions adequate for you to begin a PhD? Sincere and critical appraisal of candidate aptitude from the earliest stage is crucial to preventing future disappointment.

Questions to consider in the job interview

- Which support can I expect?
- How many PhD students does my potential supervisor have?
- How has this supervisor dealt with previous PhD candidates?
- How much supervision time can I expect? Is there a tradition of regular research colloquia, etc. at my institute?
- How much additional knowledge (methodological, theoretical and subject-specific) will I need to gain to develop a viable PhD project?

Get to know the (working) culture

Try to gain as much insight into your potential new work environment before you accept the position. Consider asking past or present PhD students about their experiences. You might also request spending a trial day at your prospective workplace. Foreign students should also take time to explore the city of St.Gallen and to consider what relocating to Switzerland might involve in terms of acculturation, establishing new social networks and pursuing leisure activities.

Negotiate conditions and expectations

Discussing expectations early on, if possible before signing a job contract, helps avoid disappointment and conflict. We suggest adopting the PhD agreement provided in this brochure as a basis for discussion.

What to clarify before signing a 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 my PhD supervisor provide?



COURSEWORK PHASE

Early orientation and academic socialisation are crucial to the PhD process. Active in-depth orientation enables candidates to understand which skills they need to develop to execute their project plan. Early orientation can prevent unnecessary frustration and maladjustments, which often only emerge later in the process.

Your doctoral programme will require you to take some courses and seminars, while you may choose others. Take the time to find the right courses for yourself and your project! Discuss your choices with your supervisor, who often has a good overview of what might be helpful for your research.

As a PhD student, please consider:

- Which skills and competencies do I need to develop to complete the envisaged doctorate? Which criteria are used to assess candidate progression and project feasibility?
- Express interest in your supervisor's academic networks and scientific community.
- Develop an academic network early on. This will make you more independent from your supervisor. It will also enable you to receive feedback from different perspectives.



PREPARING THE RESEARCH PROPOSAL

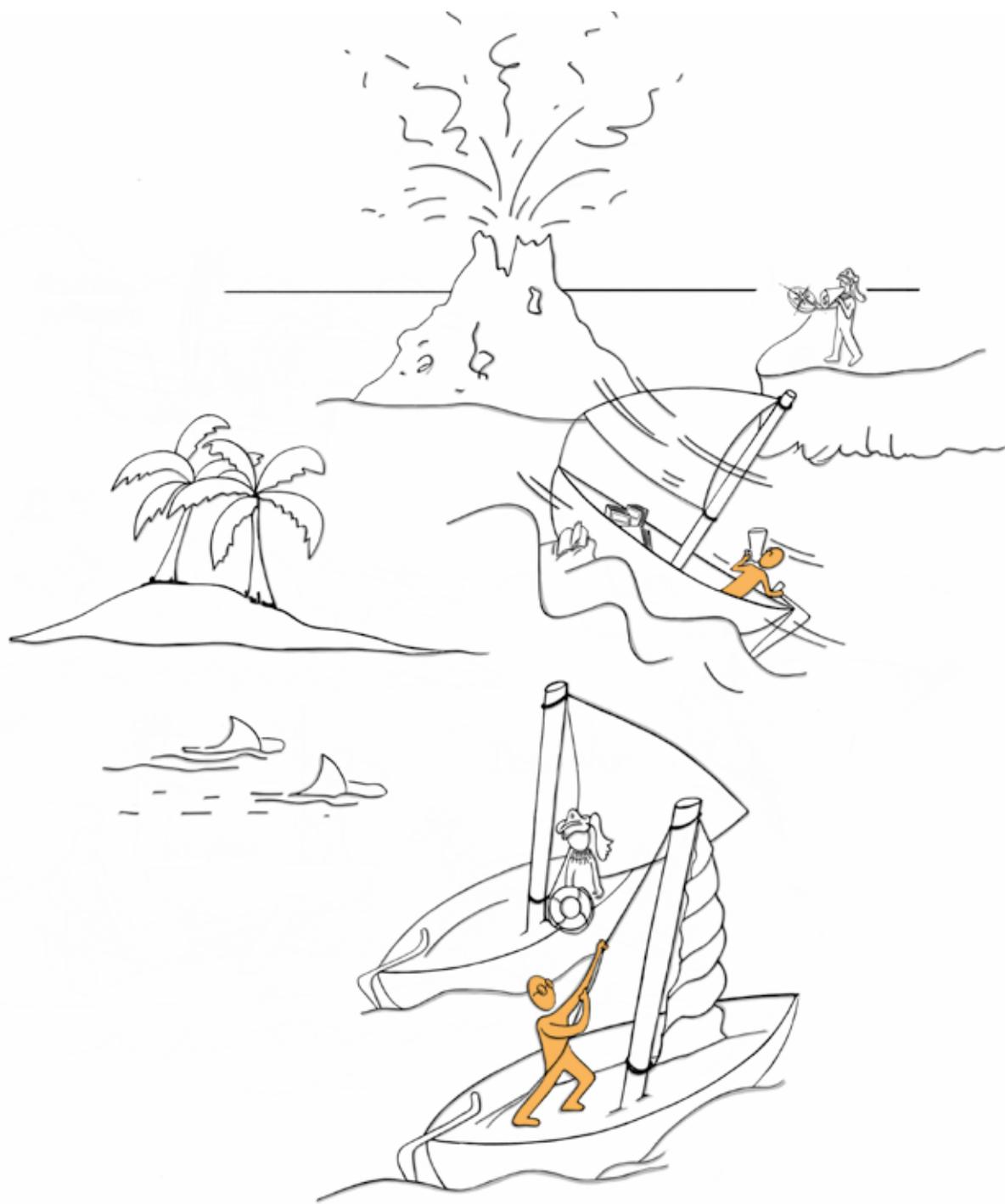
By the end of the coursework phase, candidates ought to know what they need to successfully complete their PhD studies. Essentially, a PhD project should be specific and focused enough to ensure feasibility and completion. Moreover, it should make a clear contribution to a scientific field. Thus, while practical considerations may be motivating you, bear in mind that your project must also contribute to a narrowly defined academic debate.

Thus, your research proposal should demonstrate the feasibility of your envisaged research. It provides a project roadmap and thus marks an important milestone in your PhD process. This stage helps to understand how and under which conditions you can best complete your doctorate.

The research proposal can be accepted by the dissertation committee, returned for revision or definitively rejected (see page 28). An accepted research proposal means that you are on the right track with your PhD project.

Please consider that PhD candidates and their supervisors need to agree on various issues:

- How can the doctorate be divided into more manageable and hence executable steps?
- What are the pros and cons of writing a monograph or a cumulative thesis (publishing a series of articles)?
- Which criteria apply to co-authored publications?
- How will my co-supervisor or committee of supervisors be appointed? How will they be involved?



THESIS PHASE

Having defended the research proposal marks the transition to a more autonomous phase of the doctoral 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 candidates face in this stage is transposing their ideas, insights and contributions into coherent writing, and testing their ideas beyond institutional confines. Even if candidates will be shaping their journey more independently at this stage, they still need to regularly discuss important decisions and challenges with their supervisors, also as a means of gaining reassurance.

Thus, establishing supervisor-candidate interaction, best described as “freedom within boundaries,” is an important step in this phase of the PhD process.

Complex challenges, familiar to most academics, may emerge during the thesis phase. To overcome these, we advise you to seek support early on. Giving and accepting support in the form of feedback, as well as providing scope for reflection and creativity, has become essential in modern academic life.

Stagnation

Your PhD project may temporarily hit a “dead end.” This may happen for various reasons (e.g. becoming so entangled with your material that you lose sight of the “big picture”; or your envisaged approach proves unfeasible, etc.). This may create negative dynamics: Your problem solving might produce “more-of-the-same outcomes” rather than help overcome the deadlock. As with all complex problems, regularly discussing project feasibility and one’s underlying assumptions may prove beneficial. Sharing your feeling of “being stuck” with your supervisor will allow him or her to step into their supervisory role and to help you develop an effective problem solving strategy (something many supervisors are especially good at and enjoy doing). Finally, if self-doubt, procrastination, excessive nervousness or disenchantment make working on your thesis impossible, psychological counselling may help you re-activate your resources.

Perfectionism and over-ambition

Perfectionism and over-ambition may deplete your resources and lead to frustration. Remember that a PhD only marks the beginning of an academic career and that the key aspect is “learning the ropes” (i.e. finding out how things are done and developing the necessary skills to do them). Moreover, perfectionism and over-ambition are often triggered by anxieties of falling short. Two things help: Don’t pay too much attention to detail and accept that a text need not be perfect before you can show it to others. In practice, sharing early drafts and preliminary versions in colloquia or among your peers enhances your learning process.

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, not being able to accept feedback may jeopardise progressing your project. It is important for you as a PhD student to learn how to receive feedback (see page 12 / 13) and how to deal with “bad” feedback. For example, even if feedback may be missing the point, it may help you consider which parts of your thesis still need more work.

Isolation and unresponsiveness

Sharing temporary problems (e.g. writer’s block, emotional struggles or an impasse) may require courage. This, however, is often the first and crucial step to effectively dealing with the problem in hand. If you are struggling, activate your social resources to ensure you receive instrumental, practical and emotional support.

Reaching out to your supervisor for advice and support may prove immensely helpful. It may also initiate fruitful discussions on developing a structured path out of your deadlock. Supervisors have tried and tested resources as well as proven experience in this respect.

Counselling

The University offers various counselling services (see pages 30 / 31). 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 discover that the final stage of their PhD requires considerable amounts of energy to write, rework and edit their thesis.

Find time to write

Balancing various demands is crucial to ensuring project completion. Early planning is crucial. Your supervisors may ease the burden on you, for instance, by renegotiating your workload or by temporarily relieving you of certain duties at your institute.

See the big picture

Another common problem for PhD students at this stage is recognising the value of their contribution. This sometimes proves difficult as you have been pursuing your project for a considerable length of time. Helpful ways of seeing the big picture (especially if you feel you have lost sight of it) include elevator pitches, drafting abstracts and telling the story to someone unfamiliar with the topic. Let others help you identify your contributions if you are unable to recognise them or consider them too banal.

See the end

Given the scope of your PhD project, you may struggle to realise when your PhD thesis is ready for submission. It helps to formulate feasible “enough-contributions” criteria. Also reconsider the criteria originally agreed in your PhD agreement. Your supervisor is well placed to advise you when to submit.

Plan the editing process

The very last steps also need planning. It helps to ask your supervisor how and when he or she will be able to comment on draft chapters or on the whole manuscript. Establish how much time your supervisor needs to give you feedback. Also, be sure to contact the PhD Office about official procedures and deadlines.

Establish a good balance

It is essential that you maintain a good balance between the various areas of your life throughout your PhD process. Take enough time to satisfy your physical and social needs, also during the final stages of your PhD. This helps to free up your mind, to re-energise body and soul and to keep up your motivation. Regularly maintaining a healthy distance to your PhD will help you see the full picture and to regulate your emotions towards it.

Finishing and a new beginning

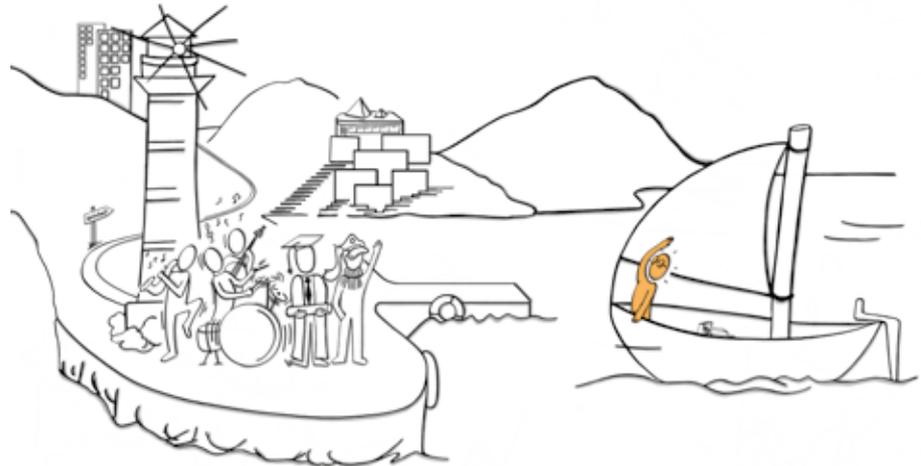
Regarding submission, you need to clearly understand the institutional process, especially the deadlines in place for PhD theses. After submission, you will need to prepare your oral defence.

When you defend your dissertation, your written work will already have been accepted. Your defence is public and you are welcome to invite your friends and family. PhD students often combine this formal occasion with offering light refreshments to celebrate their success with their colleagues and guests.

Finally, you will most likely need to consider the next steps after completing your PhD. Once you have defended your thesis, we suggest you meet with your supervisor to discuss your academic potential or your professional skill set. You may receive invaluable hints for your next career decision! Such a meeting will offer your supervisor and you an opportunity to reflect on the PhD process — and to learn from it!

Good supervision is hard and time-consuming work. Sharing your experience of the shared journey, especially highlighting what was helpful along the way, may encourage and inspire your supervisor when embarking with others on their journeys in the future.

Finally and most importantly, completing your PhD is a reason for celebration. When the University Rector hands over your doctoral certificate, you have successfully completed this important part of your education. You become part of the HSG Alumni and are ready to take the next step in your life and career. Earning a PhD involves hard and often strenuous work. Completing this shared journey deserves celebration and acknowledgement — not only from your supervisor, but also from other important people in your life, like family, friends or colleagues.



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

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

Work contract guidelines (only available in German)

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

Dealing with problematic situations

- ¹³ | Brochure on the protection of personal integrity
- ¹⁴ | Information about advice in difficult situations
- ¹⁵ | 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

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.

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

I. 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.

I.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.)?

I.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?

I.3. Anticipate conflicts to avoid them

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

I.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.

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)?

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

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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