



Completing your PhD – What to expect and some hints

Preamble

This document is designed for PhD candidates in the Graduate School of Geography and Earth System Science. It describes the last stage of your PhD journey – completing your dissertation, submitting it, being examined and what happens afterwards. **It is intended to answer questions many PhD candidates ask, but it cannot cover every situation, and it is not binding.**

As always, your PhD Committee's decisions together with the PhD Regulations are binding. If you have questions or problems, first talk to your supervisor and the head of your PhD Committee. Your next port of call are the coordinator and director of the Graduate School, followed by Ombudsperson of the Faculty of Science.

Frequently asked questions

When should I start thinking about the end of my PhD?

The SNF funds PhD candidates for a maximum of four years and the expected duration of a PhD at the MNF is four years. Although funding is sometimes available for extensions, this varies according to circumstances. At the latest, you should talk to your supervisors at the end of your third year about the funding position so that you are clear about your situation.

What if I'm not finished in four years?

Lots of people don't complete their PhDs in four years. However, depending on your circumstances, this can lead to lots of worry and stress. Generally speaking, there is no problem renewing your student registration for a fifth year – and you have to stay registered as a student until your PhD is complete. If you take more than five years, then you and your supervisor have to write a short explanation and apply to the Dean of Studies for an extension.

Can I get another job if I am not finished?

If you are Swiss, or from the EU, then a common option is to get another job to tide you over until you finish. Bear in mind that working and completing a PhD is difficult and talk this through with your supervisors. Have a clear plan for completing, and remember after five years, you may not be granted permission to continue your studies. If you are not from Switzerland or the EU, then getting another job is often more difficult or impossible.

Can I receive unemployment benefit if my position has finished?

Yes, in principle, if you have made contributions, and if you are actively looking for and available for work. However, each case is individually assessed, and the situation for people from outside Switzerland and the EU is often complicated. You shouldn't rely on receiving unemployment benefit in this situation. (More here: <https://www.careerservices.uzh.ch/en/ratgeber/stellensuche/rav.html>)

I'm not from the EU or Switzerland. What will happen if I stop being employed by the University or my funding ends?

First, try to plan things well in advance and discuss them with your supervisors. They may not be aware of all the issues that are likely to impact on you, so show them this information sheet too. We know that this period is particularly difficult for those of you in this situation, so come and talk to us if you are worried.

Second, there are three separate issues.

- 1) As far as your PhD studies are concerned, there is no difference in the regulations.
- 2) Your work permit, which allows you to live in Switzerland, is coupled to being employed by the University. If you stop being employed, your work permit will likely not be renewed, and staying in Switzerland will mean you need a new permit, most likely as a student.
- 3) As long as you are still registered as a student, then getting a new permit is usually possible. However, you may be expected to show that you have sufficient money to finance your stay – how much depends on your circumstances (e.g. if you are here with your family). Your supervisor will also probably have to write a letter explaining when they think you will finish (and that they expect you to finish). This permit is likely to be a study permit, which typically allows you to work only 20%, and requires any potential employer to apply for a work permit for you.

How long does it take from submitting my PhD until the exam?

You can expect a period of about two months between PhD submission and your exam (*see PhD Defence Checklist below*). In that time internal and external experts will read your dissertation and write reports on it. Then the circulation committee will look at the dissertation and the reports. At some times of year (e.g. in summer or around the Christmas break) your committee may need to allow more time. In any case, after submitting you can concentrate on preparing your presentation for your exam.

Do I need to submit anything else other than my dissertation?

All the milestones in Student Admin Tool need to be completed and signed off before you can register for the exam in the system. These include your teaching hours and courses taken. Don't leave it until the last minute, as they may not be checked straight away. Then you are ready for the milestone *Registration for Graduation* which will guide you through the process. Two important tips: make sure the title of your PhD conforms to the official rules, and that the name you use on your thesis is identical to that on your official ID and the same as the one you matriculated with.

Where will the exam take place?

We expect the chairs of committees to take care of organisation of rooms and advertising of PhD exams. The exam will likely be at Irchel, and the room should be booked for four hours to allow you to test everything beforehand, and for discussions at the end of the exam. Go and check all of the audio-visual equipment the day before, and get someone to come with you and help you set up. You will be a bit nervous, and having a colleague to deal with minor problems helps a lot. Note that both online and hybrid exams are possible, if exams cannot be organized in presence.

What happens at the exam?

The formats vary somewhat but generally speaking there are two parts. First, one hour where you present your work and are asked questions from the floor, followed by a second part where your committee, the external experts and members of the circulation committee ask you questions. At the end, you will be sent outside, and the examiners will discuss the result. They'll then tell you if you have passed the exam, and if you have to make any changes to your dissertation.

What happens after the exam?

If you have no changes to make, the chair of your committee will submit the minutes of the exam, recording the decision, and the final version of your dissertation for validation. If you have changes to make, you should complete these as soon as possible – agree a schedule with your supervisors, and discuss a process for agreeing the changes are complete. In general, changes should be submitted within three months of the exam. Once these are done, and everyone is happy, the revised thesis and the minutes of the exam will be uploaded for validation.

Importantly, once this version is submitted, it will be uploaded to Zora and is the formal version of record. It can then only be changed in exceptional circumstances with agreement from the Dean of Studies.

Can I call myself Dr. Sc. Nat?

Switzerland is very strict about titles. You can only use your title when you have received your final degree certificate, and not before. People sometimes call themselves Dr. des. during this period.

PhD Defence Checklist

Matter	Action	Deadline	
Final committee meeting	PhD: discuss timeline and remaining steps with PhD commission (PHDC)	Final year of the PhD	
Submission plan	PhD: discuss timeline with main supervisor (MS); submit milestones “teaching duties” & “course work” MS: find external reviewer (ER)	approx. 4 weeks before draft submission	16 weeks
Draft submission	PhD: ask feedback of PHDC and revise draft	min. 4 weeks before submission	
Official submission	PhD: submit PhD and register for graduation MS: commission external review; set date and place for defence GS: appoint Zirkulationskreis (ZK) upon request from MS	12 weeks before defence	12 weeks
Reviewing	PHDC and ER: submit reviews MS: invite GIUZ to attend the defence	4 weeks before defence	
	ZK: assess PhD and reviews; give feedback to PHDC		
Public defence	PhD: present PhD in 30 minutes to faculty, family and friends; answer questions of the audience	1 hour	
Internal defence	PhD: answer questions of ER, PHDC and 2 faculty members	1 hour	
Graduation ceremony	PhD & MS: attend and celebrate		

Document history

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