

GETTING YOUR THESIS OFF TO a good start

GUIDE FOR DOCTORAL STUDENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Is it a good idea to do a doctorate and what does it lead to? How can I effectively manage the beginning of my thesis, finance it and get organised? These are questions asked by many students in the final year of their degree course and by those who have taken the plunge and already started their thesis.

Today, a doctorate is an essential condition for carrying out research activities and outside university, it can prove a deciding factor in obtaining an executive-level position. From a personal point of view, doing a doctorate is a life experience and a form of training that cannot be acquired elsewhere. Despite all these advantages however, a thesis is a long-term and often quite solitary adventure, involving challenges of not only an intellectual nature.

In the academic world, the doctoral phase is regarded as a period of transition, or initiation, between study and independent research activities. Doctoral students are no longer looked upon as students, but are expected to expand their knowledge of the subject and develop their independence before gaining recognition as senior researchers. They must also learn the customs and practices of the academic world. Doctoral students are particularly expected to participate in the life of the institution and that of their research group, publish their work in journals and become integrated in scientific networks.

The purpose of this guide is to advise doctoral students on how to successfully negotiate the rites of passage as a PhD student and to serve as a compass enabling them to find their way in the academic world. It is also intended for those who wish to embark on a doctorate but are still unsure. Here they will find information to help them make their decision.

The starting point of this guide is the experience acquired in the context of a mentoring programme for women embarking on their thesis: StartingDoc. This programme explores the structural aspects you must be acquainted with to ensure successful completion of your thesis, such as the various stages of the academic career, researchers' rights, organising work between research and

teaching, creating networks, colloquiums and publications, balancing professional and private life, etc. This guide addresses all the questions discussed at StartingDoc meetings.

The guide is designed as a coherent whole to be read from start to finish, or consulted as necessary.

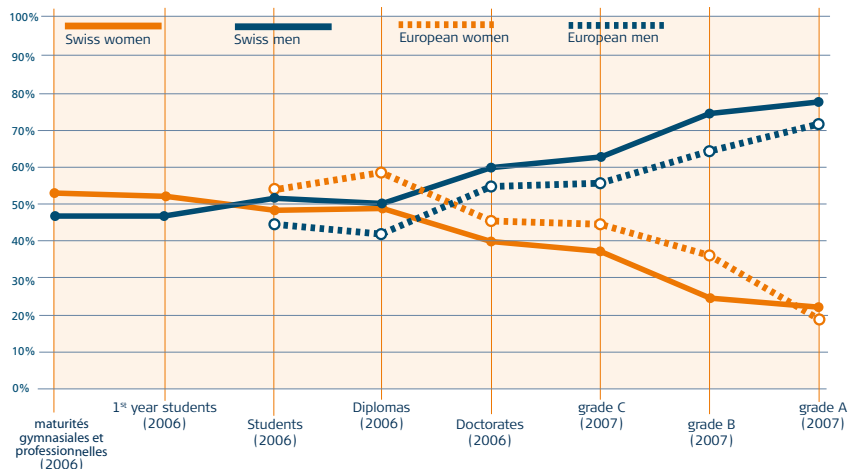


THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN SWISS UNIVERSITIES

The number of women students at Swiss universities has doubled within twenty years and is today higher than that of male students. However, fewer women do doctorates than men (57.6 % of students were male compared to 42.4 % female doctoral students in 2007) and the proportion of women among PhD holders in Switzerland (39 % in 2006) is well below the European average (45 %). At faculty level, only around 15 % of professors are women.

The metaphor of the “leaky pipeline” illustrates the declining presence of women as the rungs of the academic career ladder are climbed.

THE LEAKY PIPELINE IN SWITZERLAND AND THE EUROPEAN UNION, 2006/2007 UNIVERSITY CAREER ACCORDING TO STAGES AND GENDER



Definition of grades: Grade C = lower intermediary staff – Grade B = upper intermediary staff – Grade A = professors

Source: Office fédéral de la statistique (2009), *En Suisse et en Europe, la recherche demeure un milieu essentiellement masculin*. Press release 07.12.2009.

Over the last ten years, mentoring programmes have been organised throughout Switzerland to counter this phenomenon, thanks to the federal programme “Equal opportunities for women and men in universities”. The most recent, StartingDoc, seeks to encourage the next generation of women academics by focusing on the key moment of starting a thesis project.

To find out more

- * European Commission (2009), *She Figures 2009. Statistics and Indicators on Gender Equality in Science*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- * Office fédéral de la statistique (2009), *En Suisse et en Europe, la recherche demeure un milieu essentiellement masculin*. Communiqué de presse du 07.12.2009.
- * Office fédéral de la statistique (2010), *Personnel des hautes écoles universitaires 2008*, Neuchâtel: OFS.
- * Programme fédéral «*Egalité des chances entre femmes et hommes dans les universités*» 2000-2011, www.crus.ch > **Egalité des chances**.
- * StartingDoc: mentoring de groupe pour bien démarrer sa thèse, www.unil.ch/mentoring.

WHY DO A THESIS ?

The doctorate is the first step on the academic career path. However doing a doctorate does not just involve acquiring advanced scientific knowledge in a particular field, but also offers the possibility of developing more general methodological and social skills that can be transferred to other fields :

- analytical and deductive skills;
- the ability to communicate;
- data processing;
- time management;
- the ability to adapt to new situations;
- the ability to propose innovative solutions;
- independence;
- etc.

All these skills are valuable and sought-after on the non-academic job market. In some sectors, a PhD may even prove a deciding factor in obtaining a job with responsibilities, in the R&D divisions of large companies or in public administration for example.

From a personal point of view, the doctorate offers opportunities that few of us are fortunate enough to encounter in our career. Firstly, it offers a unique chance to delve deeper into a subject that you yourself have chosen. The doctorate also enables you to remain in an intellectually stimulating environment and offers many possibilities to gain experience abroad thanks to grants from the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) or attending colloquiums, etc. It also allows great flexibility in work management, both time-wise and geographically.

However, writing a thesis means committing yourself to a long-term experience that requires great self-discipline, the ability to work alone for long periods and to bounce back after rough passages. An academic career also involves living in a state of financial insecurity for several years. Therefore, above all else, it is on the basis of one's personal and intellectual motivations that the decision to embark on a thesis must be made.

« Le jeu n'en vaut la chandelle que si, en dehors de toute considération de carrière, vous souhaitez tenter pour elle-même l'aventure de la thèse. Sinon le prix à payer risque d'être lourd pour un résultat incertain. »

Herzlich Claudine (2002), *Réussir sa thèse en sciences sociales*, Paris: Nathan, p. 14

THE THESIS

BEFORE YOU START

Even if you are sure of your reasons, it is advisable to take the time to ask other doctoral students, intermediary staff members and professors about :

- thesis work and its specific characteristics;
- the style of supervision and scientific interests of the prospective thesis supervisor;
- working conditions in the unit to which you will be attached;
- options for financing the doctorate;
- the average time taken to complete a thesis in your field;
- conditions of acceptance for doctoral studies and requirements for obtaining the PhD title (for example: the obligation to attend a doctoral school or obtain a certain number of ECTS credits);
- training programmes in your field offered to doctoral students.

CONDITIONS OF ACCEPTANCE FOR DOCTORAL STUDIES AND REQUIREMENTS TO BE MET: WHAT THE REGULATIONS SAY

Each faculty in each institution has its own regulations regarding doctorates.

In all the regulations, the first condition for admission to doctoral studies is the possession of a degree, a master's degree or equivalent qualification.

- Generally this qualification must be obtained in the same scientific field as the thesis although some faculties are flexible to some extent.
- Regarding the equivalence of qualifications from another Swiss or foreign university, the general rule is to admit candidates who would be admitted by their original university.
- Some regulations stipulate additional conditions.

Sometimes a second condition is stipulated, namely a minimum mark for all marks obtained or the successful completion of a (master's) dissertation. The requirement of a minimum mark concerns essentially the law faculties of the universities of Geneva, Lausanne and Neuchâtel and the University of Fribourg (except in sciences), as well as the Economics Faculty of the University of Lugano (USI).

A third condition generally laid down is the prior agreement of a thesis supervisor. This condition is less common in theology.

Other conditions may apply, such as the preparation of a thesis plan, letters of recommendation as at EPFL (École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne), a certain knowledge of languages, etc.

Unlike the Latin universities, EPFL has a recruitment procedure that includes a 'doctoral committee'.

Requirements other than those concerning the thesis itself can vary greatly. The obligation to attend a doctoral school, the acquisition of a certain number of credits or the submission of pre-doctoral research work is compulsory in certain faculties and at EPFL.

You are recommended to obtain all necessary information concerning administrative procedures well in advance from faculty secretariats and/or study advisers.

HOW TO FINANCE YOUR DOCTORATE

The smooth progress of a doctorate, and especially its duration, are closely linked to the way in which doctoral students finances their doctorates and how they support themselves and, if applicable, their family.

The doctorate can be financed by an assistantship funded by subsidies and/or grants. Some doctoral students work outside the academic institution to cover their everyday- living expenses.

A UNIVERSITY POST

With regard to a grant or employment outside academia, universities offer various employment opportunities to doctoral students that have a number of advantages :

- possibilities of creating synergies with the doctorate and therefore saving time ;
- integration in a scientific environment ;
- an environment favourable to completion of the doctorate, particularly by providing doctoral students with an optimal infrastructure.

The following academic posts allow students to be remunerated for their doctoral work :

- assistants paid by the university/canton, part of whose activity is reserved for thesis work ;
- doctoral students whose doctorate is financed by external funds, particularly the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF).

Other posts exist, particularly at the University of Geneva (www.unige.ch/memento > Ressources humaines > Règlement du personnel).

The conditions of engagement (salary, duration, job description, etc) of these posts differ.

SNSF DOCTORAL STUDENTS

As opposed to assistants, doctoral students financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) can in principle devote all their working time to their thesis. However, the SNSF salary scales that determine their remuneration fall well below those of assistants funded directly by universities. The term of employment may also be shorter.

Universities have room for manoeuvre and each is responsible for managing the engagement and salaries of doctoral students financed by SNSF funds. Therefore in some cases, SNSF doctoral posts are supplemented by government assistant posts and in others an allowance is paid in return for teaching and research activities.

Unless explicitly mentioned in the regulations and directives of the appointing university, the Code of Obligations (CO) governs the employment contract of SNSF doctoral students. The CO is less advantageous, particularly in terms of social security and time off (holidays, maternity leave, parental leave, etc.) than cantonal university regulations regarding assistants.

This diversity of situations can be disconcerting. Indeed it's not always easy when signing an employment contract with a university for the first time to realise the direct implications for thesis work of the conditions of engagement specified by the contract.

In addition to human resources departments that can provide information on particular aspects of a contract, intermediary staff associations in each university are well aware of the impact these differences can have on thesis work and therefore you should not hesitate to contact them. They can also provide important information on negotiating terms and conditions.

GRANTS AND SUBSIDIES

Grants and subsidies are awarded by :

- universities
- private foundations
- the SNSF
- such as:
 - grants financing doctoral training programmes awarded by the human and social sciences division;
 - grants awarded under the MD-PhD programme (a programme for Doctors of Medicine and Science);
 - subsidies for projects (free research) in the fields of the human and social sciences, mathematics, natural sciences and engineering;
 - Marie Heim-Vögtlin (MHV) grants for researchers who have had to interrupt or reduce their research activities due to family obligations (children) or a change of residence resulting from their partner's move;
 - grants for prospective researchers that allow young scientists starting their career to spend time at a research institute abroad.

www.snf.ch