

Guidelines for the Thesis Advisory Committees (TAC)

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Introduction

The **Thesis Advisory Committee (TAC)** is a structured supervision tool designed to accompany doctoral candidates throughout their PhD journey. By bringing together the thesis supervisor, an internal advisor, and an external advisor, the TAC provides doctoral candidates with a forum for regular, constructive feedback on their research project.

Drawing on key reports, scientific publications, surveys and documentation from leading European institutions, the UniNE Graduate Campus strongly recommends that every PhD candidate establish a TAC, and it is a requirement for all PhD candidates registered at the Doctoral School in Life Sciences (DSLS) of the Biology Institute.

The TAC offers several key benefits:

- It promotes **steady progress** and timely completion of the thesis.
- It ensures **transparency and accountability** in supervision.
- It offers an **independent, objective perspective** on the project.
- It helps **identify and resolve challenges early**, preventing potential conflicts.

It is important to emphasize that TAC meetings are **not formal evaluations** of the candidate's work or competencies. They are intended to be **supportive, constructive, and stress-free occasions** where the student receives feedback, guidance, and encouragement. TAC members should be seen not as jurors but as **mentors and advisors**, accompanying the doctoral candidate throughout their progression. Their purpose is to support the students' development, not to create unnecessary workload. To make TAC meetings useful, manageable, and proportionate in terms of preparation, this document sets out the guidelines for Thesis Advisory Committees at DSLS, covering their roles, composition, appointment, meeting structure, and integration into the doctoral timeline.

1. Roles and composition of the TAC

1.1. Role of the TAC

The primary role of the TAC is to support the doctoral candidate throughout their PhD by:

- Advising on research direction, methodology, and analysis.
- Providing critical feedback on the project's progress and interpretation of results.
- Monitoring milestones and ensuring the research remains on track.
- Offering guidance and alternative perspectives in case of difficulties or the need to reorient the project.

TAC meetings serve as structured checkpoints where the candidate and committee members review progress, identify obstacles, and define next steps. The aim is to create a constructive environment that supports both the scientific development of the candidate and the smooth advancement of the thesis project.

1.2. Composition

A TAC is composed of at least three members (and maximum 5), all of whom hold a PhD:

- The thesis supervisor (and co-supervisors, if applicable).
- An internal advisor from within UniNE.
- An external advisor from another institution or organization.

Important: To ensure independence and objectivity, TAC members — apart from the supervisor(s) — should not be directly involved in the thesis project (e.g., through scientific collaboration).

It is important to emphasize that the TAC is distinct from the thesis defense jury. While the TAC provides guidance, feedback, and ongoing monitoring throughout the doctoral program, it does not participate in the final evaluation of the thesis manuscript. The composition of the final jury must be determined at the end of the PhD. This composition should be officially submitted to the Faculty of Science (doctoratscience@unine.ch) using the appropriate [form](#), at least five weeks before the private defense for approval by the Faculty Dean's office.

1.3 Appointment

Once the committee has been formed, it must be officially registered using the official TAC registration form and submitted to the DSLS academic coordinator (ds.biology@unine.ch) for validation. If changes to the committee composition are necessary — for example, due to conflicts of interest, unavailability, or other issues — a new registration form must be submitted to the DSLS.

2. TAC Meetings

2.1. Purpose

TAC meetings provide structured, recurring opportunities for:

- Monitoring progress from the early stages of the PhD.
- Offering constructive feedback to support the candidate's scientific development.
- Refining the project by identifying priorities and challenges.

2.2. Format

- Meetings are generally held online for accessibility, though in-person meetings are possible if convenient for all members.
- Each PhD candidate must hold at least **three** TAC meetings, **one per year**, during the PhD journey, but additional meetings may be scheduled if deemed necessary by the student, supervisor, or committee.
- Meetings are organized jointly by the candidate and the supervisor who are responsible for identifying a suitable date in consultation with all committee members. Once the date has been agreed upon, it should be communicated to the DSLS coordinator for confirmation and record-keeping.

2.3. Frequency

The first mandatory TAC meeting should take place within four to six months of the start of the PhD, ideally before fieldwork or major data collection begins, to assess feasibility and methodology. The second meeting usually occurs around the 18-month mark, followed by the third at approximately 30 months. A fourth meeting may be organized for 42 months if the project timeline requires it. In summary:

- **1st TAC:** within 4–6 months of the PhD start
- **2nd TAC:** ~18 months after the start of the PhD.
- **3rd TAC:** ~30 months after the start of the PhD.
- **4th TAC (if applicable):** ~42 months after the start of the PhD.

Beyond these mandatory meetings, doctoral candidates are encouraged to reach out to TAC members at any time to seek advice or guidance, whether because the supervisor is not available or simply to gain a different perspective on their project.

2.4 Organization

a) Before the Meeting

The candidate must submit a **written overview** (for the first meeting) **or progress report** (for the subsequent meetings) to all TAC members and the DSLS academic coordinator. The table below provides a clear overview of the recommended structure, length, and content focus for TAC progress reports at each stage, helping candidates prepare reports that are concise, targeted, and aligned with the expectations of their committee and the DSLS.

Table 1. Guidelines for TAC overview and progress reports:

| TAC | Recommended length | Content |
|----------------|--------------------|---|
| 1st TAC | ~2 pages | Project overview <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Research aims & hypothesis - Research questions - Planned chapters - Gantt chart |
| 2nd TAC | ~5 pages | Progress report since 1st TAC (organized by thesis chapter) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Experiments conducted - Preliminary results (summary only) - Updated Gantt chart |
| 3rd TAC | ~10 pages | Progress report since 2nd TAC (organized by thesis chapter) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Data analysis & interpretation - Conclusions & next steps - Discussion of challenges & solutions - Publication plan |

Note: It is worth emphasizing that the progress reports are not only a requirement for the TAC meetings but also a valuable exercise for the doctoral candidate. Preparing the report helps to structure ideas, reflect the work already accomplished, and clarify what remains to be done. In addition, much of the material written for TAC reports can be directly reused in the final thesis manuscript, meaning that each report represents an early investment for the later phases of the PhD. The overall process should remain simple and not burdensome; its purpose is constructive support, not administrative overload.

b) During the Meeting

Each meeting (between 1 hr and 1h30) should be structured as follows:

1. **Presentation:** Candidate presents the project overview or progress (about 30 minutes).
2. **Discussion:** Committee provides advice, questions, and recommendations (ideally within a maximum of 20 minutes).
3. **Private TAC members' discussion (without candidate).** TAC members complete the TAC report form ([download here](#)), documenting progress, skills, and training recommendations if required.
4. **Private candidate discussion (without supervisor):** the candidate can raise concerns or supervision-related issues.

Each meeting focuses on evaluating:

5. Candidate's performance
6. Project progress
7. Supervision quality

c) After the Meeting

8. **Completion of the TAC report:** the PhD candidate prepares a brief *summary of the meeting to complete the TAC report, which has already been filled in and signed by the committee and the supervisors. **The PhD summary outlines the comments and feedback received during the meeting, and the outcomes.*
9. **Submission:** the PhD candidate sends the completed TAC report (signatures + candidate's summary of the meeting) directly to the DSLS academic coordinator (ds.biology@unine.ch) without resubmitting it to the TAC committee.

10. Personal PhD Timeline

The DSLS academic coordinator provides each candidate with a personalized timeline. This includes key milestones such as committee appointment (1), yearly TAC meetings (2), report deadlines (3), supervision evaluations (4). The personal PhD timeline helps candidates and committees plan and stay compliant with the DSLS requirements.