

## Recommendations regarding TAC composition and thesis evaluations/defense procedures @ UNIGE

**Preamble:** The LNDS thesis procedures must comply with local regulations at the partner universities and faculties. Therefore, with the construction and subsequent renewal of the LNDS regulations in 2021, some elements were incorporated that need careful consideration.

First, the obligation to install a thesis advisory committee (TAC) was introduced. This aligns with other doctoral programs and aids students and supervisors in assessing projects and progress. **The TAC and thesis exam committee (= thesis jury) are not necessarily the same entities** (an important detail that was included for legal reasons)

Second, at some positions the LNDS regulations differ for UNIGE and UNIL students. One of the most prominent differences pertains to the thesis exams. **For students enrolled @ UNIGE, the PUBLIC DEFENSE is considered as the FORMAL and DECISIVE thesis exam; while for students enrolled @ UNIL, the PRIVATE DEFENSE is considered the FORMAL and DECISIVE exam.** To equalize procedures as much as possible for students at both universities, the LNDS regulations contain some adaptations providing that all LNDS doctoral candidates follow more or less equivalent trajectories towards the end of their thesis projects.

The LNDS rules are available on the LNDS website, and the student's trajectory is listed as "[Thesis milestones](#)", which include some obligations for which we provide some practical suggestions below.

In [blue](#) please see the copied text from the LNDS rules, in black suggestions on the practical handling.

### TAC – Composition and duties

*Milestone #2- the TAC composition: "Around the end of the first year of the PhD studies, the composition of the Thesis advisory committee (TAC) needs to be communicated to the doctoral program. The TAC participates in the intermediate evaluation as well as in the PhD exams according to the modalities in force at the faculty of enrollment of the PhD candidate. In agreement with the candidate, the thesis director is responsible for constituting a TAC no later than 12 months after the admission of the PhD candidate into the doctoral program. The TAC consists of a president or a representative of the doctoral program (where appropriate at UNIGE), and at least two experts holding a doctoral degree, who are active in research and independent of the PhD candidate's thesis project, and at least one of whom is external to the thesis director's department. The Scientific Committee validates the composition of the TAC and designates the person who chairs it. This person is chosen from among the full or associate professors of the partner faculties of the Doctorate in Neuroscience. The thesis director and, if applicable, the thesis co-director participate in the TAC in a consulting role."*

**Intermediate evaluation:** The TAC members do not need to provide a written report before the intermediate evaluation, just be present in the oral session with the student, onsite or online. Following the intermediate evaluation, the LNDS representative in the session fills a report (template

on LNDS website) stating that the student has passed the evaluation (or not) and collects the signatures of the TAC members and thesis director(s).

**Final thesis exams: The TAC composition can be different from the composition of the thesis jury for the final defense.** Therefore, there is no need to know exactly who one would like to have on the thesis jury at the time of the first intermediate evaluation; and one can construct different committees avoiding duplication of work at the thesis exams. For example, one could consider having only local or national scientists as TAC members, while for the thesis jury one invites (an) additional (international) member(s) or replaces (some) TAC members by other specialists. The advantage of such an approach is that the TAC is more readily accessible for the midterm evaluation AND for participation in the private thesis defense (see below: the private defense is with the TAC members, and NOT necessarily with the thesis jury experts), while the thesis jury experts are asked for duty only once at the final thesis exam. Be aware that whereas the **TAC** can consist entirely of members from the university where the student is enrolled, the **thesis jury** must include at least one expert external to the university. **The above does not exclude the possibility that the thesis jury consists of the same members as the TAC, but please just note that in this case the thesis jury experts have to participate in BOTH the PRIVATE and the PUBLIC defense.** It is recommended that these duties are communicated with the experts in advance to avoid confusion close to the exams. Leading up to the exams, the thesis supervisor can convene with the jury members to organize the evaluation process to avoid the duplication of the discussions done in the private defense during the public defense.

*Milestone #5.1a - Private defense: No later than 3 weeks before the scheduled private defense date, the PhD candidate submits the thesis manuscript to the TAC. In the defense session, the TAC makes an assessment of the quality of the PhD candidate's personal contribution to the presented work as well as his/her knowledge. The possible evaluation outcomes are "sufficient" or "insufficient". In case of failure ("insufficient"), the candidate may organize a second private defense. The TAC may also suggest modifications to the thesis manuscript. Any changes must be completed before the public defense of the thesis. The private defense is held at least 6 weeks before the public defense.*

**The date and requirements for the private defense are organized with the LNDS entirely; no need to involve the student secretariat for the faculty of enrollment. Yet, the student secretariats ask for the report (PV) once the PUBLIC defense is being organized, i.e. the private defense must be passed before the public one.**

The manuscript submitted for a (last) discussion with the TAC should be a version agreed upon by the thesis director(s) and the candidate but does not need to be the final version that will be submitted to the faculty where the student is enrolled, which needs to be done in preparation of the public defense. The prefinal manuscript is to be discussed with the TAC members and the thesis director(s) during the private defense session (which is in essence similar to the midterm evaluation). The student should prepare a presentation containing the project background, technical details, hypotheses and results, and they should prepare for an elaborate discussion of their work with the TAC members. The discussion is unconstrained in terms of time and topics, which is at the discretion of the TAC president (it typically lasts 2h, i.e. a 30min presentation by the student followed by a lengthier discussion). The session can be held online. A report stating "passed" or "failed" (template on the LNDS website) must be prepared, signed by the TAC members and the thesis director(s) and transmitted to the LNDS coordinator. At this point, the TAC can make recommendations or modifications in the content and form of the final manuscript as well as the presentation. If significant

changes/additions are needed, the TAC may request to re-evaluate the manuscript before the public defense or even request a new private defense for in-depth discussion, in which case the outcome (i.e., “pass” or “fail”) is conditional.

**In those cases where (some) TAC members will also act as jury experts in the public defense, they can prepare a short report (template on the LNDS website)** in which they list their recommendations for the final thesis manuscript and state that they generally accept the thesis to be defended publicly. The thesis director can bundle their report(s) for their overall report that is sent to the Faculty.

If the student wants to schedule the private and public defenses in advance, we recommend a delay of at least 6 weeks between the private and the public defense – to accommodate possibly significant modifications in the manuscript before final submission to the thesis jury and the faculty.

Notwithstanding, the delay can be shorter, but this is at their own risk. The TAC and thesis jury are not obliged to adhere to a preset timeline.

***Milestone #5.1b: Public defense of the thesis – Procedure:** No later than 6 weeks before the scheduled public defense date, the PhD candidate submits a proposal for the composition of the thesis jury. No later than 5 weeks prior to the scheduled defense date, the PhD candidate submits his/her thesis manuscript to the director and, if applicable, to the co-director of the thesis and to the other members of the thesis jury for assessment.*

*No later than 6 weeks prior to the scheduled defense date, the PhD candidate registers for the thesis defense at his/her faculty, providing the following information:*

- date, time and place of the public defense*
- an electronic copy of the thesis manuscript (and a paper copy for candidates @ Faculty of Medicine)*
- the exam protocol of the private defense*
- the composition of the thesis jury, including the professional address of each member and his/her function*
- a summary of the ECTS credits obtained in the doctoral program.*

*No later than 3 weeks prior to the scheduled defense date, the thesis director must send the thesis report(s) to the Student secretariat of the Faculty of enrollment of the PhD candidate. The report must have been approved and signed by all members of the jury and conclude that the thesis can be defended to the thesis jury. Any modifications to the thesis manuscript that are proposed by the jury must be completed before the defense.*

**For preparing and validating the public defense, the student secretariats of the faculty of enrollment will need to be involved.**

Once the date of the public defense is known, the LNDS coordinator needs to be informed about the jury composition (specifically indicate when this is different from the TAC plus thesis director(s)). The coordinator will provide an LNDS thesis number and the final LNDS study credit recap, provide the necessary information regarding the documents that need to be submitted to the faculty and also support the student in their communication with the faculty.

It is recommended that students inform the coordinator well in advance about the thesis jury composition, date of the defense etc (if known). The coordinator can subsequently inform the jury members about their duties and procedural details, similar to how the TAC is initially informed before the midterm evaluation.

**The thesis jury members must prepare a short report (if not already done in their function as TAC member;** template on the LNDS website) in which they list potential recommendations and state that they accept the current (final) thesis manuscript to be defended publicly. The thesis director can bundle their report(s) for their overall report that is sent to the Faculty.

**The thesis director(s) is responsible for writing a report and sending it to the student secretariat of the Faculty, stating “*approved and signed by all members of the jury, and conclude that the thesis can be defended to the thesis jury.*”**

This report must reach the faculty at least 10 days prior to the date of the public defense. Preferentially, put the LNDS coordinator in copy to provide additional information to the faculty.