

ArcTrain

Thesis Committee Guidelines

March 20th, 2020



Photo credit: Joan Vallerand

Purpose of the thesis committee


The supervision of ArcTrain (master and) PhD students is supported by a thesis committee. The purpose of this committee is to provide the PhD students with (a) multiple resource persons, (b) broader scientific expertise, (c) continuous advice and monitoring, (d) an external perspective to ensure the best quality of research and supervision, and (e) career pathway advice.

The thesis committee consists of at least three scientists, generally including the primary supervisor, research advisors, and professors/scientists from other working groups or institutions. One of the members of the thesis committee should be the Canadian/German project partner. The members of the thesis committee are chosen by the master/PhD students taking advice from their main supervisors. Within ArcTrain Germany the composition of the thesis committee must be recorded in the Supervision Agreement (see form in Appendix A).

General structure of the thesis committee meetings

Thesis committee meetings (TCM) are organised and lead by the PhD students. If possible, all thesis committee members should be present during the meetings. In addition to the thesis committee, the PhD student is free to invite additional colleagues with relevant expertise as guests. The meeting serves as an opportunity for the student and the committee to exchange and for the student to receive support and guidance on further steps of the project.

The student is free to organize the meeting to fit his/her needs, depending on the stage of the project. A list of topics that can be covered during the thesis committee meetings is provided below. Not all items need to be discussed at every meeting; however over the course of the training program the student should have addressed all topics within the thesis committee meeting, in a way that ensures steady progress.



Topic 1: Progress of the PhD project

An informal presentation and discussion of the actual status of the PhD project, including:

- What has been achieved (especially in relation to the goals set at the last meeting)
- Which questions have been raised?
- Discussion of milestones
- Further time schedule

Topic 2: Definition of goals for the following (six) months

- What are the needs with regard to lab- time, contacts to external experts?
- What should be achieved within the next (six) months?

Topic 3: Research training programme

- Which courses have been taken?
- Which upcoming courses are of interest?
- What are the needs for further training?

Topic 4: International meetings

- Participation in conferences during the past (six) months (short report, benefits)
- Which upcoming conferences would be of interest (contribution)?

Topic 5: Research stay in Canada/Germany

- Which institute will serve as a host institution?
- What research should be done?
- What will be the best time schedule for the visit?


Topic 6: ArcTrain proposals

- Are there any needs to apply for ArcTrain or other funding?

Topic 7: Career-planning

- What comes after the PhD?
- What kind of network do I need and how can I establish it?
- What are the needs for transferable skills and language training?

Topic 8: Well-being

- Work-life balance
 - Mental health
 - Work environment
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Topic 9: Date for the next meeting

If possible, an approximate date for the next thesis committee meeting should be agreed on with all thesis committee members.

Regular TCMs in the home institutions in Germany


ArcTrain Germany students should meet with their thesis committee roughly every six months. If possible all members should be attending the meeting. The Canadian project partner can join the meeting via video call. The first meeting each year should be organised by the student at their home institution and the second one will be organised during the ArcTrain annual meeting. During these meetings, the above mentioned structure should be followed (see “Thesis Committee meetings during the annual meeting”). Minutes have to be written by the PhD student after each of the TCMs. The minutes must be signed by the PhD student and his/her supervisor and submitted as a pdf document to the ArcTrain coordinator / speaker (arctrain@marum.de) within two weeks after the TCM.

Regular TCMs in the home institutions in Canada

Canadian students have a thesis committee independent from ArcTrain at their home institution. However, in most cases, a German ArcTrain advisor is associated with an ArcTrain Canada student and he/she can naturally join meetings via video call when useful. Students are welcome to discuss with their supervisor having an additional ArcTrain TCM, outside the mandatory one taking place during the ArcTrain annual meeting. The guidelines above for general ArcTrain committee meetings could apply.

TCMs during the annual meeting

The structure of TCMs during the annual meetings can vary from those at one's home institute. It is a relatively short meeting (45-60 min) with often scientists present who are not necessarily familiar with the project of the student. The student, in agreement with their supervisor, can suggest which of the PIs and associated professors participating in the annual meeting they




want to be present during their TCM. The discussion items of the meeting should be chosen based on the committee members present and their ability to help within the time available. To this end, it might be helpful to circulate information on what is planned and/or an agenda prior to the meeting in order to use the time efficiently. It is better not to attempt to address all points listed above, but focus on the most relevant, for instance on career planning and training needs; the research stay; or other aspects important to the student/for the project. It is important that the student communicates to the committee what to discuss and what the output of the meeting should be.

Postdocs have the option to decide whether they would like to take the opportunity to discuss any research or career related topic with experienced PIs present at the annual meeting or not. They are also able to join a student's thesis committee meeting if they get asked to do so.

Cultural Aspects and Communication

The thesis committee meetings should be as helpful as possible. To achieve that, it would be good to keep the following things in mind:

- Constructive criticism will be a part of these meetings. It should be issued and understood accordingly. Being able to make use of it is beneficial to the project as well as long term.
 - As the ArcTrain student is the one organising and leading the meeting, all TCM members have to respect the proposed agenda. If the discussion drifts from the original agenda, it will have to be relevant and for the well-being of the student only, if not, it is strongly recommended that the student or any other members of the TCM mention it to ensure the good progress of the meeting.
 - Past experiences have shown that feedback and comments are not always perceived as they were intended, making the meeting less valuable. Hereby one should keep in mind that many of us have a different cultural background. During the TCMs, students might then be faced to a wide range of personalities and different supervision approaches.
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- If a student ever feels discriminated, treated unfair or uncomfortable in any way during a TCM and they don't feel like they can address this directly in the meeting, they are encouraged to approach a supervisor they trust, a fellow student or the ArcTrain coordinator for them to act as a mediator and help solve the issue and offer support.
 - Within ArcTrain it is common practice to address all members on a first name basis.
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