

## **Cotuitelles de thèse or PhD partnerships between Swiss higher education institutions and partner higher education institutions in Europe<sup>1</sup>**

### **Explanatory notes 2025**

- on [grant applications](#)
- on drawing up a cooperation agreement
- on the evaluation of applications
- on the validity of the cooperation agreement and project conclusion

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<sup>1</sup> The call for applications is open to *cotuitelle de thèse* projects and PhD partnerships with all recognised partner higher education institutions (<https://www.enic-naric.net/credential.aspx>) in the Bologna system ([https://ehea.info/page-full\\_members](https://ehea.info/page-full_members)) and with partner higher education institutions in Israel, in accordance with the current practice of the European research programmes.

## Introduction

Each year, the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI) awards funding for *cotutelle de thèse* projects and PhD partnerships that are the subject of a cooperation agreement between a Swiss higher education institution and a partner higher education institution abroad ([Europe](#) and Israel) that regulates at the very least the mandatory points mentioned in [chapter 2.2](#). An allowance of up to CHF 10,000.00 serves to cover additional costs that are generated through completing doctoral study in a *cotutelle de thèse* or a PhD partnership (doctoral study at two institutions) as compared to completing doctoral study at a single institution (additional costs include, in particular, the travel and living expenses of the doctoral student and her/his supervisor for traveling to the partner higher education institution abroad). swissuniversities is responsible for administering the programme.

A *cotutelle de thèse* or a PhD partnership in the framework of the current programme financed by SERI goes beyond the co-supervision of a PhD thesis and is defined by the following:

- the PhD thesis is completed under the direction of two supervisors. Both PhD supervisors contribute significantly to advising the doctoral student, specifically with regard to selecting the doctoral student, defining the research project, providing support during doctoral study and evaluating the work/research conducted;
- a cooperation agreement regulating at the very least the mandatory points mentioned in [chapter 2.2](#) is concluded between the two participating higher education institutions;
- a joint thesis defence or similar is held, in which both participating higher education institutions are involved;
- a joint certificate or two certificates is/are issued; in both cases, it must be explicitly stated that doctoral study was completed either in the scope of a *cotutelle de thèse* or a PhD partnership with higher education institution X (see clarification below);
- a relationship to both institutions is established: matriculation as a doctoral student or an employment contract.

### Clarification between *cotutelle de thèse* and PhD partnership

The term ***cotutelle de thèse*** is reserved for collaborations between two higher education institutions that have the authority to confer a PhD. The two institutions issue a joint doctoral degree certificate or two separate certificates. The certificate or certificates must bear the information that doctoral study was completed in the framework of a *cotutelle* with higher education institution x.

The term **PhD partnership** is used for collaborations between two higher education institutions of which only one institution has the authority to confer a PhD. In such cases, two constellations are possible:

- 1) a partnership between a Swiss university of applied sciences and arts (UASA) or a Swiss university of teacher education (UTE) and a higher education institution abroad that has the authority to confer a PhD; or
- 2) a partnership between a Swiss cantonal university or federal institute of technology and a higher education institution abroad that does not have the authority to confer a PhD.

Only the institution with the authority to confer a PhD issues the doctoral degree certificate. The certificate must bear the information that doctoral study was completed in the framework of a partnership with higher education institution X.

## 1. Grant application and use of funds

### 1.1 Participation

The call for applications is open to *cotutelle de thèse* projects and PhD partnerships with recognised<sup>2</sup> partner higher education institutions in the Bologna system<sup>3</sup> and with partner institutions in Israel, in accordance with the current practice of the European research programmes.

**Eligible to participate** are doctoral students who:

- are matriculated as doctoral students at a Swiss higher education institution or who have an employment contract at such an institution;
- are Swiss citizens or holders of a B, C or G residence permit.<sup>4</sup>
- have studied at least one year (two academic semesters) at the bachelor's, master's or doctoral level in Switzerland by the application deadline of 31 March of the year for which the call was issued. The duration of doctoral study is calculated based on the date of matriculation for doctoral study.<sup>5</sup> If more applications are submitted than can be accepted, applicants who earned a degree (bachelor's or master's) at a Swiss higher education institution are given preference.
- are under the age of 40 upon submitting the application (application deadline is 31 March of the year for which the call was issued), the age limit of 40 years may only be exceeded in legitimate, well-founded exceptional cases (e.g. disruptions in an applicant's career).<sup>6</sup>

Applications are only considered if a **cooperation agreement** regulating the *cotutelle de thèse* or the PhD partnership and, at the very least, the mandatory points mentioned in [chapter 2.2](#) has been concluded.

### 1.2 Application submission and evaluation

The [complete application](#) (grant application, cooperation agreement and other enclosures) must be sent by the rectorate of the Swiss higher education institution or an office designated by the rectorate to the address [cotutelles@swissuniversities.ch](mailto:cotutelles@swissuniversities.ch) by **March 31 of the year of submission**, in the form of a single PDF document. In addition, the completed [application form](#) in its original PDF format must also be submitted separately.

➔ **Paper documents sent by post will not be accepted.**

When submitting an application, it is important to provide a clear and coherent whole with a 'readable' and easy-to-follow professional background. It is also essential to check that all required attachments are included. It is recommended to submit the application in advance

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.enic-naric.net/credential.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> [https://ehea.info/page-full\\_members](https://ehea.info/page-full_members)

<sup>4</sup> Foreign nationals living in Switzerland who have a B, C or G residence permit must enclose a copy of the permit in the application.

In exceptional cases, this requirement may be waived if the expert committee can establish a clear and consistent connection between the doctoral student and the relevant Swiss higher education institution.

<sup>5</sup> Persons who do not have a degree from a Swiss higher education institution (bachelor's or master's), are required to enclose confirmation of matriculation of a Swiss higher education institution that details the duration of study in Switzerland (specifically, the minimum duration of one year).

<sup>6</sup> Persons who have reached the age of 40 before the application deadline (31 March) are required to enclose a written justification (cf. [section 1.1 Participation](#)).

and clarify any outstanding questions with the contact person at the higher education institution or the General Secretariat of swissuniversities.

The grant application is reviewed by an expert committee composed of three representatives from a cantonal university or federal institute of technology; a representative of a university of applied sciences and arts (UASA); a representative of a university of teacher education (UTE). The committee decides on the amount of funding based on the added value a *cotutelle de thèse* or a PhD partnership has for the PhD project of the doctoral student. The decision is final; appeals are not permitted. The grant is issued once and cannot be renewed. Applications that were not approved may be revised and re-submitted at a later date (a maximum of two re-submissions – or in total, one application per doctoral student and project may be submitted a maximum of three times).

### 1.3 Use of funds

The following principles form the guidelines for the use of funds awarded by the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI), on the basis of the decision of the swissuniversities expert committee “*Cotutelle de thèse* and PhD partnerships” (in the following: *cotutelle* or partnership grants). The guidelines complement the disbursement agreement between swissuniversities and the PhD student/PhD supervisors as well as the regulations (for example, the regulation on expenses) of the responsible Swiss higher education institution.

The Swiss higher education institution is responsible for a correct, purpose-oriented use of the funds. The PhD supervisor is obliged to disburse the disposable funds in a way that best supports the PhD student.

#### Basic principle

In principle, the grant is awarded to **cover additional expenses that are generated by the *cotutelle de thèse* or the PhD partnership** as compared to doctoral study completed at only one institution. Costs incurred outside of the *cotutelle de thèse* or PhD partnership are not covered (for instance, costs to publish or print the PhD thesis).

#### What can a *cotutelle* or partnership grant be used for?

The *cotutelle* or partnership grant helps to cover:

- transportation, and living expenses - for visiting the partner higher education institution - of the.
  - o PhD student (main purpose)
  - o PhD supervisor at the Swiss higher education institution

Costs for room and board in connection with a stay at the partner higher education institution abroad are deemed living expenses. The applicable expense regulation of the relevant Swiss higher education institution may be applied to reimburse travel and living expenses. The funds do not cover travel to third party countries (i.e. countries other than the partner countries involved in the *cotutelle de thèse* or PhD partnership) or to conferences or colloquia that are not related to the *cotutelle de thèse* or the PhD partnership, nor can it be used for accommodation and meal expenses in Switzerland;

- whenever possible, the train should be the preferred means of transportation between the two countries. Air travel is only permitted for long distances. The regulations of the Swiss higher education institution serve as a reference.
- travel and living expenses incurred by the PhD supervisor of the partner institution for travel to and stays in Switzerland in connection with the *cotutelle de thèse* or PhD partnership (supervision of PhD student, meetings between the two PhD supervisors);
- additional expenses in connection with the *cotutelle de thèse* or PhD partnership that are borne by the PhD student (e.g. costs for materials,<sup>7</sup> additional fees for the partner institution abroad etc.);
- costs incurred due to the PhD defence or similar, in particular travel and living expenses of examination committee members that are not assumed by the participating higher education institutions. The cotutelle or partnership grant is, however, first and foremost to be used to cover expenses of the PhD student and thus does not cover all expenses incurred by members of the examination committee.
- The funds do not cover costs related to the accompaniment of the doctoral student by a parent and/or a child.

#### **From when and for how long can the Cotutelle or partnership contribution be used?**

In principle, the right to use a grant formally begins with the signing of the cooperation agreement by all responsible parties. Only expenses incurred after all parties have signed the cooperation agreement are covered. The use of funds may be backdated to cover expenses incurred before submission of the application for a cotutelle or partnership grant (starting one year before the submission deadline of March 31 - this means from April 1<sup>st</sup>) as long as all responsible parties have signed the cooperation agreement for this period.

The use of the grant in any periods for which the doctoral student has funding from other sources is excluded, provided that these other funding sources cover the entire mobility costs.

The right to use the grant formally ends with the completion of doctoral study (PhD defence or similar) or in the case that the project is terminated before completion. A very limited use of the grant money after the PhD defence is possible in individual cases for legitimate reasons, for instance, to cover expenses – in the country of the partner higher education institution abroad – related to the validation of the results of the project completed in the *cotutelle de thèse* or PhD partnership (participation in conferences...) or to attendance at the degree conferral ceremony.

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<sup>7</sup> Upon completion of doctoral study, any procured materials remain in the possession of the Swiss higher education institution.

## 2. Cooperation agreement

### 2.1 General information

[Applications](#) are considered only if a cooperation agreement regulating at the very least the mandatory points of [chapter 2.2](#) has been concluded. The doctoral students must discuss these modalities with their supervisors. The two higher education institutions draft the details and review the formal agreement; the responsible authorities at the higher education institutions must then sign the agreement. In order to underline the institutional commitment, in addition to the signatures of the PhD supervisors and the doctoral student, it is desired to have two levels of signatures, i.e. the two higher education institutions commit themselves by the signatures of the executive board (e.g. Rector or president or person designated by the Rectorate/Executive board) as well as by the heads of the respective faculties/departments in charge of the doctorate (or person designated by the faculty/department).

By 31 March, all the signatures of the Swiss higher education institution must appear on the cooperation agreement. Signatures missing of the partner higher education institution at the time of submission may be sent at a later date. The grant can be paid only once all signatures have been completed on the cooperation agreement. The doctoral students are responsible for ensuring that all necessary steps are taken on both sides (at the Swiss and the foreign institution). Obtaining the required signatures can be time consuming; it is therefore recommended that doctoral students initiate the process promptly.

Higher education institutions that do not have a template for an agreement may use the sample cooperation agreement of swissuniversities ([German](#), [French](#) and [English](#)). The text can be adapted to accommodate the particular circumstances of the specific higher education institution and/or discipline; it must, however, at the very least regulate the mandatory points mentioned in [chapter 2.2](#).

### 2.2 Content of the cooperation agreement

The two participating higher education institutions are responsible for the content of the cooperation agreement. The institutions are called on to jointly regulate the administrative and supervisory issues.

#### Required information

The cooperation agreement must at the very least regulate the following points:

- the name of the two higher education institutions;
- the name of the doctoral student;
- the title of PhD thesis;
- name and positions of the PhD supervisors at both institutions, who share equally the responsibility for monitoring the work completed in the scope of the *cotutelle de thèse* or PhD partnership and are required to fulfil all supervisory obligations vis-a-vis the PhD student;
- the division of time spent working at each institution;
- the award of the doctorate degree and the mention of the *cotutelle de thèse* or PhD partnership:
  - in the case of cantonal universities and Swiss Federal Institutes of Technology, the agreement must specify

- a) whether both institutions each award a doctorate diploma or a joint diploma, and
- b) whether the diploma(s) or an accompanying document specifies that it's a doctorate in the context of a *cotutelle de thèse* with university X.<sup>8</sup>
- o in the case of universities of applied sciences and arts (UASAs) and universities of teacher education (UTEs), the agreement must specify
- c) whether the doctorate diploma or an accompanying document specifies that it's a doctorate in the context of a PhD partnership with the Swiss higher education institution X.

#### Additional information

In addition to the mandatory information mentioned above, the two higher education institutions should also regulate the following additional elements:

- the date of matriculation valid for the *cotutelle de thèse* or PhD partnership;
- the anticipated duration of the *cotutelle de thèse* or PhD partnership;
- the entry into force and validity of the *cotutelle de thèse* or PhD partnership;
- the applicable fees; specifically, that the doctoral student pays the annual study/semester fees at only one of the partner institutions, with the clarification that one of the two partner institutions formally waives the corresponding fees;
- the higher education institution and the country where the PhD thesis is defended;
- modalities on constitution and appointment to the examination committee for the thesis defence or similar.
- the language in which the PhD thesis is written and defended as well as the language in which oral and written summaries of the thesis are made;
- the publication of the PhD thesis, information on the deposit copy of the thesis, authorial information and printing;
- health and accident insurance of the doctoral student in both countries.

#### 2.3 Information exchange / organisation of the *cotutelle de thèse* or PhD partnership

The responsible offices of the partner institutions or the PhD supervisors organise all necessary procedures for a constant exchange of the information and documents required to organise and conduct a *cotutelle de thèse* or PhD partnership. This includes documentation on regulatory provisions of the country or of the higher education institution regarding the doctoral degree in general as well as the intellectual property rights to the topic of the PhD thesis as pertains to the deposit copy, printing and publication, and the use and protection of the research findings. If necessary or requested, intellectual property protection is regulated in a separate appendix.

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<sup>8</sup> In the case of a partnership between a Swiss cantonal university or Federal Institute of Technology and a higher education institution abroad without the right to award doctorates, only the Swiss higher education institution awards a diploma. The agreement must clarify whether the doctorate diploma or an accompanying document specifies that it's a doctorate in the context of a PhD partnership with the foreign higher education institution X.

### 3. Evaluation of applications: Criteria and selection policy

#### 3.1 Evaluation criteria

When evaluating applications, the expert committee considers the following criteria (the review of the formal criteria is conducted by the General Secretariat of swissuniversities prior to the evaluation meeting):

##### Formal accuracy, completeness and readability of the dossier:

- The program applies exclusively to doctoral studies.
- The application dossier forms a coherent whole and contains all information that is important for the evaluation of the application. The career of the doctoral candidate is legible, and it is clear how the Cotutelle project is situated in this context.
- The cooperation agreement regulates at least the obligatory points mentioned in [chapter 2.2](#). The cooperation agreement must be signed by the president or the rector of the Swiss higher education institution or by a person designated by him/her<sup>9</sup>. All signatures of the responsible persons of the Swiss higher education institution are obligatory for the submission of the application. Signatures of the partner higher education institution that are missing at this time can be submitted later.
- The sections of the application form may not be changed.

1. Fulfilment of individual requirements (cf. [section 1.1](#))
2. Equal opportunity: If more applications are received than can be approved, the expert committee decides in favour of a balanced representation of both genders, provided the applications are equal in quality.
3. Diversity of regions and disciplines: Participation in the programme is ideally distributed across as many Swiss higher education institutions and as many disciplines as possible. If more applications are received than can be approved, the expert committee may limit the number of approved applications per PhD supervisor.
4. Design of the cotutelle de thèse or PhD partnership project:
  - Added value: Benefits of the *cotutelle de thèse* or PhD partnership (established relationship to both institutions and dual supervision) and the collaboration with the partner institution abroad for the doctoral student's PhD project.
  - Complementarity: Reasonable distribution of research between the Swiss and foreign institution. In the case of PhD partnership between a Swiss university of applied sciences and arts (UASA) or teacher education (UTE) and a partner institution abroad, the specific features of the Swiss institutions regarding research type and methodology must be accommodated.

<sup>9</sup> In order to underline the institutional commitment, in addition to the signatures of the PhD supervisors and the doctoral student, it is desired to have two levels of signatures, i.e. the two higher education institutions commit themselves by the signatures of the executive board (e.g. Rector or president or person designated by the Rectorate/Executive board) as well as by the heads of the respective faculties/departments in charge of the doctorate (or person designated by the faculty/department).



### 3.2 Selection policy and allowance

1. Selection policy: The expert committee refers to the following selection scheme for awarding funding.

<p><b>Funding awarded</b></p> <p>CHF 10,000.- (within the means available and subject to the remarks in point 2* below*)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Well-designed <i>cotutelle de thèse</i> or PhD partnership project with a realistic implementation strategy;</li> <li>▪ Convincing presentation of the added value of collaboration with the partner institution abroad for the doctoral student's PhD project.</li> </ul>
<p><b>No funding awarded</b></p> <p>no funding awarded</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The concept and/or the implementation strategy of the <i>cotutelle de thèse</i> or PhD partnership project do not (fully) meet the criteria;</li> <li>▪ Unconvincing presentation of the need for, or added value of, collaboration with the partner institution abroad for the doctoral student's PhD project.</li> </ul>

2. Reduced funding: Regardless of the quality of the application, approved projects that are already in an advanced stage or that will soon reach the project deadline named in the cooperation agreement receive reduced funding. In addition, any other sources of funding related to mobility costs and/or the geographical distance between the two higher education institutions may be taken into account when determining the contribution amount and may lead to a reduction in the subsidy.
3. One-time character of the grant: An allowance for a doctoral project may only be disbursed once and covers the entire duration of the project.
4. No entitlement: There is no legal entitlement to receive funding.

### 3.3 Communicating decisions and use of funding

1. Communicating decisions:  
The General Secretariat of swissuniversities communicates decisions by email to the Swiss supervisors and applicants. The expert committee reserves the right to impose additional requirements to be met for the disbursement of the subsidy or make recommendations to modify the project, even in the case of approved projects. There is no correspondence between the General Secretariat of swissuniversities and the dissertation supervisors and applicants regarding the decisions. However, the General Secretariat is available to the Swiss higher education institutions' contact persons for *cotutelles de thèse* and PhD partnerships for any necessary clarifications in connection with the decisions.
2. No appeals possible: The expert committee's decision is final. Applications that were not approved may be revised and re-submitted at a later date (a maximum of two re-submissions – or in total, one application per doctoral student and project may be submitted a maximum of three times).
3. Disbursement and administration of funds: The funds are disbursed to the Swiss higher education institution. The PhD supervisor at the Swiss institution is responsible for administering the funds; for this purpose, a disbursement contract is drawn up and signed. The applicable expense regulation of the relevant Swiss higher education institution may be applied to reimburse travel and living expenses. The Swiss higher education institution shall keep proof

of expenditure in accordance with its internal regulations. Upon request, the Swiss higher education institution must be able to present the statement of expenses incurred including receipts.

#### 4. Begin and conclusion of the project

From the standpoint of swissuniversities, the *cotutelle de thèse* or PhD partnership begins when all parties have signed the cooperation agreement (only expenses incurred after this date are reimbursed).

Both institutions jointly terminate the cooperation agreement with immediate effect in the following cases: if the doctoral student submits a written notice prematurely ending doctoral study in the framework of the *cotutelle de thèse*/PhD partnership; or if both PhD supervisors prohibit the doctoral student from continuing work on the project.

After the defence of the thesis or similar, as well as in the case of a discontinuation, the thesis supervisor of the Swiss higher education institution is responsible for informing swissuniversities about the use of the funds or any remaining balance (on request: statement of expenses incurred including receipts on request). The PhD supervisor at the Swiss higher education institution and the doctoral student submit a report providing an account of the successful completion of doctoral study or, if applicable, the reasons for premature discontinuation, to the General Secretariat of swissuniversities (cf. form: [final report](#), in [French](#) or [German](#)), attach a copy of the diploma(s) and send it electronically to [cotutelles@swissuniversities.ch](mailto:cotutelles@swissuniversities.ch). Any unused funds must be returned to swissuniversities. The latter will issue an invoice upon receipt of the final report. The Swiss higher education institution shall keep proof of expenditure in accordance with its internal regulations.