

IRTG-SFB 1243: Guidelines for a structured TAC-Meeting

*The **Thesis Advisory Committees (TACs)** are fundamental to the SFB 1243 Integrated Research Training Group. Each doctoral candidate who is involved in the program should assemble a TAC at the start of his/her PhD project.*

These guidelines were developed to meet the needs of doctoral candidates and supervisors concerning the TACs and TAC meetings and to ensure a uniform quality of mentoring within the SFB.

General information

What is the purpose of a TAC?

TACs are instruments for constructive supervision during a PhD project. The annual TAC meetings are important for monitoring progress, to ensure that the doctoral candidate is receiving the training and supervision required for success of the project and personal goals, for exchange of expertise among TAC members, and for project orientation by determining long- and short-term goals. In general, the goals for TAC meetings are:

- to provide an opportunity for doctoral candidates to summarize their work and present progress reports,
- for orientation, moving projects forward and avoiding dead-ends,
- assessing achievements and/or problems,
- mediation, if necessary,
- setting realistic project (and publication) goals.

Who needs to have a TAC?

All members and associates in the IRTG graduate program must have a TAC. Doctoral candidates who are enrolled in other graduate programs (such as IMPRS, LSM, HELENA, TUM-GS, MMRS/*PhD.med.res.*) but are associated with the IRTG should follow the TAC guidelines of the respective program.

Who should be members in a TAC?

A TAC should consist of at least four members. In addition to the doctoral candidate and his/her direct supervisor, two other project leaders with relevant background and/or appropriate technical expertise should participate. Additional members may be included if desired. It is strongly encouraged to include other SFB 1243 members in the TACs for constructive interdisciplinary project-related input and supervision. Inclusion of junior group leaders (post docs) as TAC members is also encouraged to help them gain experience in structured supervision.

Potential TAC members should be discussed between the doctoral candidate and his/her supervisor at the beginning of a research project, and should be approached by the doctoral candidates themselves, asking whether they agree to be a TAC member.

Additional notes:

1. Members of the LMU *PhD.med.res.* program must have at least one LMU Faculty of Medicine professor in the TAC; TUM candidates working toward a *Dr.rer.nat.* must have a TUM faculty professor with a *Dr.rer.nat.* in the TAC.
2. The TACs do not have to be fixed for the entire PhD project. If necessary the composition of the TACs can be changed (expanded) if there are project-based or personal requirements.
3. The coordinator of the IRTG should be informed about the composition of the TAC (doctoral candidates' responsibility!).
4. If a TAC member agrees to participate in a Thesis Advisory Committee, he/she agrees to abide the terms of these guidelines. Membership in/association with the IRTG is coupled with adhering to these guidelines.

How often should the TAC meet?

The first TAC meeting should be held within the first 6 months after the start of thesis research. From then on, the TAC meets annually, totalling at least 3 TAC meetings during the course of a doctoral project.

1. Doctoral candidates are responsible for initiating and scheduling TAC meetings, and for informing the IRTG coordinator.
2. If a doctoral project takes longer than 4 years, further TACs are advisable and can be initiated by either the doctoral candidate, the primary supervisor or the IRTG coordinator.
3. If either the doctoral candidate or the supervisor feels the need for mediation due to unforeseen difficulties, an extraordinary TAC meeting can be convened.
4. For Helmholtz Zentrum members: Extension of a contract into a 4th year is conditional to a recommendation from the third TAC meeting!

Detailed Instructions for the TAC meetings

Preparations for the (first) TAC meeting:

- The doctoral candidate arranges a convenient date for a TAC meeting with all TAC members and informs the IRTG coordinator.
- The doctoral candidate sends a general project outline to all TAC members prior to the meeting. This should include a general introduction of the research topics, an overview about the techniques used and ideally a rough time schedule for the first year of the research.
(This information should be available for the TAC members at least two days before the TAC meeting. The project description is only required for the 1st TAC or whenever there are major changes of the project.)
- The doctoral candidate defines a list of topics that he/she would like to discuss.
(This list should be available for the TAC members at least two days before the TAC meeting. Preparation of such a list is required for all TAC meetings.)
- TACs can be coupled to an institute's/group's progress report meetings. All TAC members should attend the progress report, after which the TAC members discuss all matters of the PhD project in a closed session.
- If the TAC is coupled with a progress report, normally not all data can be discussed during the allotted presentation time. The PhD-student brings along all data that he/she would like to discuss ("labeled" blots, gels, pictures, graphs, protocols, etc.) for the closed session.

TAC meeting procedure:

- The primary supervisor (or designated TAC member) moderates the discussion according to the doctoral candidate's "topic list" to ensure an efficient discussion avoiding time-consuming, excursive discussions.
- The TAC session should focus on moving the PhD project forward in terms of problem solving, possible alternative strategies, time management, and probable output (publications).
- At the end of the meeting the PhD student as well as the supervising PI will have the opportunity to talk with the TAC members in the absence of the group leader or the doctoral candidate, respectively. This procedure is mandatory, even if no differences are evident!

Documentation:

The results of the TAC meetings are summarized in a brief protocol. The protocol can be written by either the moderating supervisor or by the PhD student, and should include a brief evaluation, mention of any shortcomings or problems discussed, long- and short-term goals that are determined during the meeting, as well as any recommendations. The protocol should be signed by all attendees, and a copy sent to the coordinator promptly after the TAC meeting. A template for the protocol is available for download at <http://www.sfb1243.bio.lmu.de>.

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