

FAQ Graduate / Doctoral School & Ph.D at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Lausanne (EPFL)

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Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Lausanne (EPFL)

1. Disclaimer

*This FAQ was written as a compilation of mails of many EPFL doctoral students. No guarantee is made of its correctness and it may contain subjective opinions of the contributors. This document is just aimed at giving you an idea about graduate school at the EPFL, and is **not endorsed** by the EPFL in any way. For the most part, the original grammar and spelling of the e-mails is preserved.*

2. Questions

- *Hi,*

K did his MSc at IISc and now working at M. He would like to know about the Computer Science dept at EPFL. Can you please help him ?

Ans : Dear X,

Sorry for the latency in replying. I was a bit tied up.

About doing a Ph.D here:-

Formally EPFL has two different methods of induction into the Ph.D program. One is the Doctoral school, which is a grooming school for Ph.D, and the other is direct recruitment by a professor.

If you would like to apply to the EPFL directly, then you will be channelled through the Doctoral School (this applies equally for Computer Science and Communication Systems). This essentially is a short course that prepares you for doing a PhD. In case of advanced qualification (like a masters from iisc, some of the course material will be waived). During this doctoral school both you as well as the school have the opportunity to appraise each other's strengths and weaknesses. You will be able to judge which professor you would like to work with etc, and will also be given the opportunity to do a short project at any lab of your choice. Here, you are not assured of a ph.d position till the end of the course.

On the other hand, if you would like to directly join the Ph.D program, it would suffice to write to the professors detailing your research interests and providing them your CV. Mention the work that you have already done. If the professor is interested in you, (which is very possible), he will do the needful to get you a position. I

would suggest you peruse the web-sites of different departments and choose some of the people you would like to work under. Remember that when you apply directly to the prof, there is not as much flexibility as the doctoral school.

These are the two options available to you.

Hope this has been of use.

- *I am R from IIT Madras. I am in 4th aero with a minor in Theoretical CS , I want to apply in Computer Science to EPFL. Would you have any pointers ?*

Dear R,

Hi, nice to hear from you. How are things going on there ? I would like to know first of all, what you would like to do ? Do you want to do a masters or a Ph.D?

If you are interested in doing a Ph.D, this is an excellent place with a lot of freedom, funding and ambience, which in my opinion, far surpasses that of the US doctoral programs. It is also supposedly relatively shorter than the US.

On the other hand, if you want to do a masters and then leave this is perhaps not a good option. I would advise you to go to the states instead. I don't know whether the masters degree given here would satisfy your aspirations, although in terms of getting jobs and other things, you shouldn't have any problem.

Hope I have answered your question. Get back to me with a little more details and I can help you better in case you are interested.

- **All the EPFL web-pages are in French! How do I translate them ?**

To translate all the pages search for epfl.ch in Google. Then click on the 'translate this page' link. Google has an excellent way of recursively translating all the links of the page .. so as long as you keep with that link, Google will automatically translate most of the pages that you browse to.

- *Is it true that u cant work in Swiss after post graduate due to visa restrictions? -V from IIT Madras*

Well, the straight out answer to this question is no. You **can** work in Switzerland after your postgraduation or

your Ph.d. Just as in other countries, you need to get a work permit to work here. This means you need your potential employer to apply for this on your behalf. It is true, that this is not generally a very easy process, and may take some time. However, if your employer is motivated enough to have you, this really does not pose any problem. This is considerably easier if you are either working with the university, or with some big company. However, be warned that knowledge of the local language (French or German), is generally preferred, although it may be waived depending on your job.

- *One question you haven't addressed is that of dependents, i would like to know how easy or difficult is it to get a dependent along with you and how will that affect the cost of living over there ?*

If you are in the doctoral school, you will earn around 2000 CHF (in hand) every month. Bringing a 'dependent', for instance a wife is possible with this amount, although it will be a little difficult. Some of my friends have had their spouses here and managed quite well on this amount. The only problem being, it will be pretty difficult to save much.

You can count around 700-900 CHF for a two bedroom place, and around 500-600 CHF for a one bedroom apartment. Then there is mandatory insurance (around 200 CHF) and travel passes (100 CHF) and food (depends how much). Of course it is *possible* to manage with this amount. However, if you have a direct 'PhD' fellowship its very possible that you can bring a spouse on this amount.

Now, if you have a young child (baby) or plan to have one during this time, this will be more difficult as baby care, baby stuff is a little expensive, especially if only one of the parents is working.

- *For aspirants like me, going for PhD program immediately after a B.tech in mechanical engineering, do i need to apply to the doctoral school or mail the profs ?*

I am not sure whether the Mechanical Dept has a doctoral school yet. You can write to the profs, although you should really make your case clear, and tell them why you want to do a Ph.d, and what you have done so far. Its a little bit more tricky here than in the US in this aspect because if there is no doctoral school, there is no period during which your prospective advisor can gauge your progress, without having committed to you for a ph.d. However, as I said, if you can make your case, it should not be a problem. You can write to the professors you are interested in, (flooding them is not advisable though). About details of a doctoral school, you can write to the secretary of the department.

- *Hi wanted to know the kind of accommodation I would be getting there.I mean whether it would be a single room in a hostel or a house shared between students etc.Also whether there would be a kitchen,heater,cooking range*

etc... And how do other students usually stay there? Editors note: This question was asked by a student who had already secured a Ph.D position at EPFL

As you are treated as an employee, you are not permitted to have rooms in a hostel. You will have to rent out a studio. The facilities you have depends on what you want to pay for it. For 500-600 francs, you will get a decent one room+kitchen+toilet. If you want it furnished, you will have to pay more.

You could rent out an apartment, which in general take 1 month (15 days if you are very lucky). You will have to visit those apartments and request for them formally, and then the agency will decide.

As it might take around 1 month to find a new apartment, you may request your lab's secretary to arrange a place for you for the first 1-2 months. You can ask that once you have the approximate dates of arrival. If you have to stay in a hotel or so, it will be very expensive. Try to be early enough so that the secretary can find a place.

- *Hi, I have the following background Project assistant at [x] for one and a half years, patent on [x] pending approval,1 paper, GRE scores in the 1900s, 60 percent and 70 percent in bachelors and masters. With this background, what are my chances of getting an admit to the doctoral program at EPFL*

I suggest you write to professors in your field of interest with your CV. Knowing that you already have some good research background, there is a good chance that they maybe interested in hiring you.

However going through pre-doctoral school (which is quickly becoming a requirement), might be a little tricky as the admissions are getting a little harder nowadays.

- *Is getting a research assistant job very difficult and if we get it, can we save something?*

If you get it, you can definitely save money, and you will definitely be quite comfortable. The cost of living here is however, more than in the states, although the money you receive is also higher.

- *Is living for vegetarians very difficult there?*

I don't particularly think so. If you are planning to eat only from the EPFL canteens, it maybe a little bit difficult, but if you bring food from home it should be no problem at all. Many people do the same. Now there are also a few restaurants on campus that give fully veggie meals, although some people find it hard to adjust to the western veggie cuisine.

- *What value does a Ph.d fetch there and what are the future prospects? That depends on your abilities during and after a Ph.d. I would still say that the prospects are very good.*
- *What other papers/documents do I have to carry with me to Switzerland(i.e.Apart from my passport and educational certificates?)*

I think those will do.

- *To Switzerland, I see that there are flights there are flights to Zurich as well as to Geneva, Would it be take less time/strain to take a train to Lausanne or take a connecting flight to Geneva & then take a train to Lausanne?*
Sure, it takes only 1 hr by flight while it takes 3.5 hrs by train. The train fare of Zurich-Lausanne would be around SFr 65/- while Geneva Lausanne is SFr 20/- Most airlines would charge you more than the difference. Check out what the prices would be. Swiss air will not charge you extra for Zurich-Geneva.

Editors note:- If you are not a Ph.D student at EPFL, and you are either a tourist or a student coming to do shorter graduate courses, it is highly recommended that you buy a half price card as soon as you land in Switzerland. This card gives you a fifty percent discount on all your train travel. Trains are generally quite expensive and it is very useful to have this card. There are other offers like discounts if you are under 25 etc. You can visit <http://www.rail.ch> for more information.

- *I've done ME from IISc, Bangalore, India and I'm exploring the possibilities of doing a PhD at EPFL. My areas of interest are Operating systems, Computer Networks, Databases, etc. Please let me know whether there are any groups at EPFL working in these areas. I'd also be interested in any suggestions you might like to give.*

That seems to be quite a spread of interests. If you want to do a Ph.d, I would suggest you focus on the subject that you like the most.

Operating Systems : Not very strong here.

Computer Networks : Very good with very famous people like Boudec. Distributed Systems : Andre Schiper, Rachid etc.. good lab .. but doctoral school maybe a pre-requisite unless you have worked extensively in it before

Databases : They work predominantly in spatio-temporal databases For further info <http://lbdwww.epfl.ch> . Don't know whether they have enough funding for getting new PhD students.

- *Does the pre-doctoral school offer a masters degree. You had said that it is OK to leave after graduate school in terms of getting a job. So I just wanted to know whether they give an actual degree or whether that degree is accepted if one is not doing a PhD. What is the graduate school degree called ?*

Well I know from others that it is not like US MS degree. Yes people do get very good jobs after this degree. It will get you PhD positions and jobs in other parts of Europe also. From my batch two persons are explicitly opted for job one is going to US and other has got a job here. One more from Communication Systems is going to Microsoft.

Editors note: 2005 update, a fully fledged masters program is now being offered by EPFL

- *Is there anything specific to keep in mind in asking for accommodation in Lausanne or near EPFL?*

Nothing you have to be a bit early otherwise the best places will get filled up. So write to your secretary or other friends soon. It is OK write to her.

- *I wanted to take an international license while I am in India! Do u think its useful ? I remember that i can drive there for some period of time with my indian license*

Get an international license. Then you can drive for one year without shifting to the Swiss license. It is a good idea to get one, then u can rent a car if you want to do some travelling. EPFL employees get good deals with certain car rental agencies. Just take a little time to learn the Swiss rules, and remember to take a reasonable amount of insurance on the cars, because accidents and traffic offences can really be expensive.

Editor's Note :i Yes, really expensive. Inadvertently jumping a red light cost one of our friends well over 500 CHF

However, Switzerland, (unlike the US) is a very 'non-car' friendly place. This means you can travel around from almost any place to the other using the public transport. Especially for living and working in Lausanne at EPFL you do not need a car. Most graduate students do not own a car, and get by largely with the busses and trains. However, for longer sightseeing trips it can be cheaper to rent cars, particularly when you are car pooling.

- *hi, I am coming there shortly. How can I get to EPFL from Geneva? Anything i have to take care while coming: money, clothes, documents? Hope accommodation and other things won't be a big problem.*

Usually the doctoral school secretary arranges for accommodation. Perhaps you could send her an email.

You can take the train from Geneva airport railway station. It is just below the airport.. and you have directions all over that take you the railway station.. The ticket to Lausanne cost you something like 25 franks.. To reach EPFL, you could take a metro from Lausanne Rly station. If you have a lot of luggage, I would advise a taxi. Just get a print out of the address and a map of where in EPFL you want to reach.. This is because the taxi drivers seldom speak English.

If you like to take the metro from Lausanne to EPFL, just come out of the railway station, cross the road and the Metro station is just opposite to the railway station. You have to buy a ticket for CHF 2.5 from the vending machine. From the metro station, there is a metro that goes up to Lausanne Flon. It is the next stop.

From there you have to change to another metro from the same station. It is perpendicular to the metro line from the railway station. The same ticket is valid. You get on the metro and get out at EPFL station. The successive

stops are marked inside the metro and it is not difficult at all. To make a call, you need to buy a Swisscom telephone card, which is available at any newspaper shop. For example, there is one at the railway station close to the exit.

- *Hi, Hope you are doing well..I had contacted both the addresses given to me by telephone, both the student housing seems to have gotten booked. I was given a list of houses by the university people. Its a very exhaustive list. I was wondering whether it is prudent to actually come there and then look for a place? I thought I could book into Jeunotel (a youth hostel in Switzerland) in the meanwhile and then look around. Do you think this is OK? I would not suggest that but keep it as the last minute option. I would like to know a few details so I can start looking for you a studio apartment or so. You will be getting a fairly good amount of money per month as scholarship here. If you don't have any commitment at home to send money or help them financially then probably you can move into a studio. I am asking this because people generally go for student housing because they are relatively cheaper (300-450 CHF) than studio apartments (600 CHF onwards).*
- *I have started buying some clothes. I was wondering what kind of winter wear you would recommend that I buy from here before coming there.Should I get a leather jacket, or any thermal clothes ?*

CLOTHING :

1. Leather Jacket with hood - 1
2. Leather Gloves - 1
3. Woollen gloves - 2 (optional)
4. Woollen socks - 3
5. Thermal - 2
6. Muffler - 1
7. Monkey cap - 1 (optional)
8. Sports shoe - 1 (at least, more preferable)
9. Formal shoe - 1 (at least)
10. Spare shoe laces (threads) - 4 (mandatory)
11. Formal shirts & Pants - Depending on weight (Clothing is very very costly here. Try to buy as much as possible in India because there only you will get cheap and good clothing) – 5 pairs
12. Jeans , T-shirts and Shorts - Depending on weight (You need them for normal use and summer wears) — 5
13. Underwear - 5 (at least)

FOOD :

1. Crackers (Murukku, etc. Indian items, you will not get them here with good quality. You need them to help your hunger)
2. Podi items

Other than this, every thing is available here. No need to carry them. Of course they are affordable.

- *Is there anything I should keep in mind about the flight, like travellers cheques etc ? Do you think its useful to carry an Indian credit card?*

PRECAUTIONS :

Please go through the following points carefully.

1. Always carry Travellers cheques (TC). As far as possible avoid carrying hot cash. (If you are carrying travellers cheques, keep the Counterfoil or receipt, which contains the Traveller's cheques numbers separately. This is very very important because, if the TC is lost or stolen, you can say the TC numbers for reclaim, which is very easy. One of my friend's friend lost her TCs with that receipt, so it was very difficult for her for reclaim. There will be 2 signing places in the TC. In one, you have to sign, when the purchase of TC is made and the other signing is to be done just before encashing the TCs)
2. Carry 2 Xerox copies of your passport and visa papers (if given separately) and keep them in different places.
3. Always carry the telephone numbers (secretary's number, my number etc..) along with you in your hand-bag. (Keep multiple copies of them in different places. I would even advice to take Xerox copy of flight tickets).
4. Even though you are having confirmed flight ticket on your hand (for International flights), try to Check-in 4 to 5 hours before the flight departure time. It may be boring in the Airport, but that is the safe way. (In my friend's friend case, he was having confirmed ticket. He went for checking in 2 hours before the flight departure. He was not allowed. The reason is, some time they overbook the flight and then off-load the passengers. Its crazy thing, but some times they do. In that case, you can not fly in the booked flights. You will be allotted then some other flights, till then you have to wait.)
5. In an A4 size paper, write /print your name, source and destination address, contact telephone numbers and properly stick them to your Check-in luggage. This is very much helpful, if your luggage is lost. This is also helpful in identifying your luggage, when it comes in conveyer belt along with other's luggage. Similarly keep source and destination address, contact telephone numbers with your hand bag too.

Depending the accommodation you might have to buy some utensils, I will write to you about it later. I guess you are coming by Swiss Air, you give a letter to them that you are coming here for studies and ask them to carry more luggage then the usual 20 kg. They will allow it. Thats for all now.

This was not the case, they did not allow any extra baggage. And now, Swissair is dead.

3. Contributions in 2003

This section contains some of the newer questions asked in 2003. Most of the information in this section has been taken from:

<http://lthiwww.epfl.ch/bsraj/>

and has been written by Sibi. Check his page for any updates.

- *How is EPFL ?*

Depends on the dept and section u plan to come.

- If it is information theory , we do have some of the best in the business here. Infact over the past few years EPFL has grown to become one of the information theoretic hubs of the world. Infact with half a dozen such people it has become a den of young information theorists. check <http://lthcwww.epfl.ch> <http://lthiwww.epfl.ch> <http://lcmwww.epfl.ch> If ur interest is mobile communication, software radio, coding theory, wireless networks etc... the above are the ones who do that in communication system. pls check electrical department for further labs..
- If it is signal processing, couple of stalwarts are here. If u r interested in video processing, communication signal processing, wavelet analysis etc <http://lcavwww.epfl.ch> in Image processing, wavelets , splines etc.. <http://bigwww.epfl.ch>
- Computer networks There are 3 computer networks lab, doing a wide variety of things from terminodes to TCP analysis and Network Calculus. <http://icawwww.epfl.ch>
- Nonlinear systems If chaos and nonlinearities interest you, we do have one of the solid guys in the field here. Work range from superconductors to Chaotic communication. <http://lanoswww.epfl.ch>
- If applied-stochastic interests you, say queuing, point process, martingales, spectrum estimation etc, the right guy is here. Prof. Bremaud comes here in alternate weeks, but the students say that is more than enough.
- There are other labs working on distributed systems, cryptography etc. which i am not familiar with. Do check the main website.

- *How is Lausanne ? Is it a pretty place* A very beautiful place worth a visit. See <http://www.lausanne.ch>

- *I joined EPFL. what all shall i bring?*

Lausanne is an expensive place, but the fellowship is enough for you to live decently. It is always better to bring warm clothing, say some thermal wear and sweaters. It is better to carry a pressure cooker and some vessels as these things are prohibitively costly here. Be prepared to say bye-bye to indian food if u don't cook.

There are no decent indian restaurants at a cost anywhere near affordability. Good to keep some money, that too in swiss francs, say about a 1000 francs **Editors note: Don't worry if you don't have that much, you can make do with even less** in the beginning. You will get a month's scholarship in advance. And of course the best thing one can bring is to get something special for the fellow indians here.

- *The EPFL people say that they can't give me a place in the hostel? What do I do ?* This is indeed a tricky issue. Finding houses in Lausanne is not an easy task at all. And it is not our old men's hostels where people can accommodate one more guy. u need to do a host of other things before accommodating , if he is not a visitor. Swiss laws and taxes are to be respected... the safest way is to book a room in Lausanne youth hostel from India itself. stay there for a week or so and look around in EPFL for advertisements.

- *Can you give me some general information about the following*

- **Courses and studies**

it is always better to sit in couple of lectures and decide.

- **PhD**

From my experience, a Ph.D position is not always guaranteed to a student who joins doctoral school. So if your interest is with a particular professor, write to him after you get an admission. Ask specifically about availability of positions and chances of you getting it. Though most of the professors follow some ethical codes, thats not always guaranteed. On the economical end, depending on the vacancies in the lab, your performance in the school, one may get more than double the fellowship amount as research salary.

- **Quality**

If your aim is to do a good Ph.D, all u have to do here is to convince the right professor. Especially with communication systems, the kind of work people perform is as comparable to the top US universities. One just need to keep track of the IEEE journals for a certificate. If not for the sheer volume, the class of work is on par with the best ones. Again, the quality of the university has lot to do with the students, and with the very best of the world lining up in places like Stan, UCB, there is no scope even for a comparison along that lines. Still one can have some measure, by the way in which the Comm. dept is retaining some of the very best of its undergraduate students for Ph.D. something iit-s can't think of.

- **Chances after EPFL**

Lot of queries were directed at this point. In general, the answer is same as what u r going to do after a PhD from any place. It is true that good US universities have such reputation that adds extra mile-age to one's resume. So ur doing PhD has more to do with more miles with little diesel than njoying the drive itself, US is ur haven.

4. Not So Frequently Asked Questions

Contains information about rather specific questions regarding places here read it if interested

- *Hi all, I have questions about cost of living in 1)Switzerland (Zurich)*
2) *Germany (Stuttgart or Frankfurt and also smaller towns like Tübingen/Jena). Switzerland (Zurich) - the cost of living here is about 25 to 30 % higher than in a similar town in Germany.*
Germany (Stuttgart / Frankfurt) is much more expensive (greater than 25%) in terms of housing as compared to a small town like Tuebingen in the western part of Germany. Places like Jena in the former east germany are much cheaper (less than 25%).
- *Also how conductive is the social atmosphere now towards people of Indian origin in these countries as technical workers and in the community in general. This is in the wake of the recent happenings in the world*
No change as long as you behave normally and use your commonsense. It does go a long way if one is able to understand and speak a bit of the language.
- *What are the factors we need to take into account if I move to these places as a Graduate Student of single status. How much do we need to make a month live life as desis do (I think I tend to behave like a desi ...serious) .*

I do not want to comment on how you would like to live and behave. I presume that as a fresh graduate that you will need at least DM 2000.-per month to start-off with, but you may want to consider more if you have to travel etc. Fees for the University are nil currently, you may consider applying for a research assistantship which will certainly look after all your living expenses.

5. Other FAQs for EPFL

Editors note: This section of the FAQ takes from the document created by Ali Shahrokni, and was available from the Vision Lab website : <http://ligwww.epfl.ch/vision/misc/faq.html>

- *Can I bring my wife/husband?* Yes you can, you should wait to get a permit to for her/him that al-

lows them to stay in Switzerland, usually with this permit she/he can't work, that mean you should consider the costs, you might be interested in obtaining a student permit or working permit (hard to get) for your spouse so that s/he can work too. With student permit, s/he should apply to a program and usually the students are not allowed to work. Contact your advisor for more information.

- *Where can I find more information about the available positions?*

If you are interested to make a PhD in EPFL, I suggest you to check regularly this site: <http://emploi.epfl.ch/>, where several PhD position are offered in different field.

- *How long does the admission process take?*

usually the paper work after acceptance by the advisor (for category a.) take around 3 months to prepare your working permit, you need about 1 3 months to get a Swiss visa too. for categories b and c please see the relative websites

- *How should I write my CV so that I get more chances?*

Generally speaking, try to mention just the most important parts that highlight your success and achievements related to what you wish to do, your future advisor is not interested in knowing the name of your kids nor your high school. Try to be as short as you can and at the same time transfer as much useful information as you can.

- *Can you give me some idea about the living costs in Lausanne ?*

Living costs in Lausanne: Public transportation: 50 CHF/month, Housing: 400 CHF 700 CHF, Insurance 150 CHF/month, Lunch at university restaurant: 8.5 CHF, meal at a city restaurants: 20+ CHF, coffee at the campus cafeteria 1.5 CHF, city: 3 CHF, Sports center 40CHF/semester for category, Cinema: 14 CHF, a bottle of coke 2 CHF. Using this information and considering your income you can estimate how much you can save.

- *What documents do I need to submit for my application for a ph.d student?*

You need several letters of recommendation depending on the request of your future advisor. You need a resume which summarizes your educational background, GPA's, career experiences and publications and honors. You might be asked for an interview in English. Usually, 1 year after you arrive here you should provide you official graduation documents from your previous universities, so that you can be registered as a Ph.D. student. i.e. before that you are a research assistant not a student.