

Applying for a PhD abroad

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The purpose of these slides is to give some advice regarding whether and how to apply for a PhD in Economics in countries other than Switzerland. The content is based on the experiences/opinions of the authors (and their friends) and necessarily incomplete and subjective.

Plan

- General considerations
 - PhD abroad vs. in Switzerland
 - Preparation
- Application process
 - Timeline
 - What you need & what matters
- Resources

PhD/Doctorate abroad vs. in CH

- Duration: generally similar, may take a little longer abroad (more coursework), especially in US
- Coursework: abroad generally two years (~Masters), in CH Masters / one year Gerzensee and/or summer schools / short courses. Gerzensee ~ condensed version of 1st year US PhD
- Supervisor/Field: in CH generally chosen at the outset; abroad after years 2/3 (but can be very flexible – US: usually several advisors)

Gerzensee (<http://www.szgerzensee.ch/courses/doctoral/>): condensed version of 1st year US PhD. Most Swiss PhDs: no equivalent of 2nd year US PhD. Second year US PhD: field courses that introduce students to the recent research in their fields of specialization.

Advisor: In US usually several persons. Amount of advising in total probably higher than average Swiss Doctorate, but high variance within Swiss Advisers, some give very frequent input, but sometimes also less freedom.

PhD/Doctorate abroad vs. in CH

- Funding / Teaching&Research-Assistance:

In CH 'internal students' generally funded for whole duration (i.e. no fees, and get stipend) and work as TA/RA for entire duration. 'External students': unpaid but work somewhere else at the same time.

Abroad, varies a lot by country/institution. May have to pay fees and work from the outset. If lucky, no fees (most US institutions) and get stipend for some or all years. TA work generally from year 2/3. Other sources of income: fellowships, foundations.

Abroad: most private high-level PhDs in the US provide free tuition and funding for most of the years, US Public Universities (such as Universities of California), and UK universities often have fewer funding resources for PhD students

PhD abroad: main advantages

- **Breadth & Size**
 - High-level coursework in different fields; often, almost all fields represented in one place
 - Access to resources – human (faculty) and others
 - Fellow students: many peers with similar interests, lots of contact through courses
 - Funding for research projects
- **Freedom/flexibility**
 - Work with many different faculty members, choose your own projects, choose your TA/RA topics & load
- **Reputation**
 - Particularly important in academic job market

PhD abroad: possible disadvantages

- Money
 - fees (if have to pay them) can be very high, especially in US and UK (>CHF 20k/year, at least for MA year(s)).
- Duration (especially US)
- (Possibly) less guidance/supervision
 - not part of a 'chair', as is usually the case here

In the US, at top-tier universities, almost nobody pays fees.

Preparation – do I need a Masters?

- European programs (UK, Spain, France, Italy, Scandinavia,...): should be possible to enter directly after BA. Then, 1-2 year MA and start of thesis work. Of course, also possible to come back to CH for PhD, or (possibly) to do MA here and thesis work there (often, have to pass entry exam).
- US: unlikely to get in without Masters. May want to do 1-2 year MA in CH/Europe/Canada first (if in CH, possibly with Gerzensee) and apply during that time.
- Exchange year during BA/MA may be good way to get preparation & make connections with local faculty (also for future LoR). Gerzensee (also the week-long courses) is also good for that.

Timeline

Application process takes approximately 1 year -start early!

1. Collect information (formal and informal) about the process and the universities
2. Select universities you want to apply to.
There is a lot of randomness in the process!
Apply to many places (10+) in order to increase your chances (aside: application fee is ~\$100 each time, plus GRE/TOEFL scores, plus transcripts...)

- 1) Contact people you know abroad, or members of the Swiss Economics Abroad Network who have gone through the process (current PhD students), to give you advice, etc. They have a lot of informal information, can be useful for all the followign steps

- When thinking about appliation fees, remember life-time consumption smoothing, and how little 2000 CHF is compared to your life-time earnings...

Timeline [cont.]

3. Ask for letters of recommendation (LoR)
LoR are crucial, especially if your university is not known in the U.S.
4. Prepare for and take standardized tests
 - a) GRE: Graduate Record Examination
 - b) TOEFL: English TestSeveral sources: Books, online practice tests, CDs,...
However, you DO have to practice (mainly for GRE math part)!

Timeline [cont.]

5. Order official sealed transcripts (grades) and official sealed translations (if transcripts not in English)
6. Write your statement of purpose (SoP):
Why do you want to do a PhD at University X?
7. Fill in application forms (some online). Application deadline depends on University, usually between December 1 and December 31

Timeline [cont.]

7. Admission decision: March 15 (or before)
8. Visit universities you are admitted to
9. Make your admission decision until April 15
10. Start of PhD program: July-August

What you need & what matters

(in decreasing order of importance)

- Letters of Recommendation
 - Ask professors who know you well (and like you), but are also known outside of Switzerland. They should be enthusiastic about you; lukewarm letters won't do. Ties to a university you're applying to can be a plus.
- Technical skills
 - MA from a known university
 - mathematics courses (math department)
- Strong background in economics
 - MA from a known university
 - Gerzensee program

Letters are extremely important. Style of letters is very positive, US letters usually exaggerate a lot, get Swiss profs to do that, too. E.g. If they say „he's a good student“ in the US this is read as „he is stupid“. Ask for examples of US letters of recommendation to show your Swiss professors for guidance.

The more internationally renowned the person who writes your letter, the more weight it will have.

What you need & what matters [cont.]

- High score on math part of GRE (800/800)
 - Good score on GRE is a necessary condition, especially on the math part. The AdCom may not even look at the rest of your application if the math score is too low.
 - Most universities require a TOEFL score of at least 230-250, but beyond that it does not matter much.
- Good grades
- Research experience
- Statement of Purpose
 - Say that you want to spend your life doing top-notch academic research (even if you're not quite sure yet)

GRE: only the math part of the GRE really matters (and perhaps the analytical writing – you don't want to look too bad). Don't waste much time studying vocabulary for the verbal part of the GRE and for the TOEFL. Use interactive CDs to prepare, it's more useful practice than books.

Resources – make a well-informed decision!

- Online resources:
 - www.econphd.net
 - <http://www.urch.com/forums/phd-economics>
- Get in touch with people in the programs you're interested in
 - often, department website has list of PhD students, or contact details of program administrator
 - could also search on facebook.com
 - or, of course, check list on swisseconomistsabroad.org
- PhD students like to procrastinate, so will usually be eager to help...