

Evaluation report

**Leadership tools in the qualification phase of
academic staff:**

Supervision Agreements, Status Talks and
Postdoc Career Planning Conversations at the
Friedrich Schiller University Jena

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Introduction

Attractive employment conditions and good leadership by supervisors are essential for a successful qualification in academia. In order to achieve a successful collaboration between supervisors and staff, open and trusting communication marks a crucial foundation. Friedrich Schiller University Jena provides different tools to support the cooperation between doctoral candidates as well as postdocs and their supervisors.

In 2023, the Graduate Academy evaluated the following four key measures: Supervision Agreements, Status Talks about the progress of the doctorate, Postdoc Career Planning Conversations, and the time for Qualification. Through an online survey, doctoral candidates, postdocs, and their supervisors were asked about their experiences with these measures. The data were subsequently analysed using descriptive statistics. The sample includes 1016 doctoral candidates (response rate: 24.2%), 231 postdoctoral researchers (29.4%), and 151 supervisors at the University of Jena and the University Hospital Jena (24.1%).

The evaluation results provide a comprehensive overview of the experiences of doctoral candidates, postdocs, and their supervisors with leadership tools at Friedrich Schiller University Jena. Details can be found in the German version of the report.

Executive Summary

Time for Qualification and Funding of the Doctorate

Time for Qualification during Working Hours (Doctoral Candidates)

- 62.7 percent of doctoral candidates are able to dedicate at least one third of their working hours to their doctorate. Just under a fifth can only spend less than a third of their working hours (6.8%) or no working time at all (12.3%) on their doctorate.
- For 18.4 percent of the doctoral candidates, the doctorate and their employment are thematically distinct.

Funding of the Doctorate

- Three quarters of doctoral candidates (74.2%) report one source of funding. 25.8% cite two or more funding sources for their doctorate.
- The most commonly named source of funding among the surveyed doctoral candidates is employment at the University of Jena (39%). This is followed by scholarships (19.5%) and financing through funds from a partner or relatives (15.2%).

Supervision Agreement between Doctoral Candidates and Supervisors

How many doctoral candidates have a supervision agreement?

- 97.3 percent of doctoral candidates state that they have concluded a supervision agreement. More than half of the respondents (51.6%) have signed the supervision agreement „as part of the application for acceptance as a doctoral candidate.“
- Two thirds (67.3%) of the supervisors report having all the supervision agreements available. Only one tenth of the supervisors (10.2%) say they have only sporadic or no supervision agreements available.

What is included in the supervision agreements?

- Doctoral candidates mention an average of 5.1 topics, while supervisors cite 8 topics that are included in the supervision agreements.
- Nine out of ten doctoral candidates (90.5%) state that the „topic of the dissertation (including the working title)“ is included in the agreement. At least half of the doctoral candidates name a „timetable for the writing of the dissertation“ (59.6%) and „the intended type of dissertation“ (51.1%) as included in the agreement.
- The „preferred channels of communication“ (5.9%), „arrangements for reconciling work and family life“ (7.1%), „publication of interim results“ (9%), „planned frequency of professional exchange“ (9.8%), and „funding of publications“ (9.9%) are the potential elements of supervision agreements least frequently mentioned by doctoral candidates as included in their agreements.
- Verbal agreements regarding the „preferred channels of communication“ (49.5%) and the „planned frequency of professional exchange“ (43.6%) occur relatively frequently according to the doctoral candidates.
- Supervisors, like the doctoral candidates, most frequently mention the „topic of the dissertation“ (97.8%) and the „timetable“ (77.8%) as being part of the supervision agreement. They least frequently mention „funding of publications“ (5.2%), „deadline for submission“ (17%), and „funding of conference participation“ (17.8%).
- „Deadline for submission“ and „funding of conference participation“ are the only topics doctoral candidates mention more frequently as agreed upon in writing than supervisors. All other topics are mentioned more frequently by supervisors. The largest differences between supervisors and doctoral candidates relate to „regular reporting obligations on the progress of the doctorate“ (+29.7 percentage points) and „planned frequency of exchange“ (+39.1%).

Is the supervision agreement used?

- About one in four doctoral candidates have referred back to the supervision agreement (27.1%), most often before meetings with their supervisors (12.4%).
- 51.5 percent of the supervisors state that they adjust the supervision agreement as needed with the doctoral candidates. 30.8 percent refer to the supervision agreement to prepare or structure status talks.

How are the supervision agreements assessed by doctoral candidates and supervisors?

- A little less than half of the doctoral candidates (47.4%) see no discernible benefit in the supervision agreement. Among the surveyed supervisors, just over a third (37.8%) see no discernible benefit.
- The highest approval among the surveyed doctoral candidates is with the statement that the supervision agreement provides an official connection to the University of Jena (60.3%).
- Almost half of the doctoral candidates agree that the supervision agreement gives them legal security (48.6%). Only one in five supervisors (21.5%) states this.
- About one in four doctoral candidates agree that the supervision agreement has clarified the resources needed for their doctorate (27.1%). This is slightly less agreement than for the statement that the supervision agreement has helped them to understand the expectations of the supervisor better (27.7%).
- Approximately three out of ten doctoral candidates (30.2%) agree that the supervision agreement has helped clarify their own expectations of supervision. About half of the supervisors agree that the supervision agreement helps clarify mutual expectations with the doctoral candidates (53%).

Structured Status Talks for Doctoral Candidates

How many doctoral candidates have already had status talks?

- 71.8 percent of doctoral candidates report having had a status talk. Of these, 61.7 percent have had a status talk at least once a year. 39.4 percent have had five or more status talks.
- More than a third of supervisors (38.5%) report conducting status talks at least „semi-annually.“ Another 44.4 percent conduct status talks „about once a year.“ Only 6.7 percent of the supervisors state that they never have status talks with their doctoral candidates.

How well known is the guideline for the structured status talk for doctoral candidates?

- Supervisors (70.2%) are significantly more familiar with the guideline for the structured status talk than doctoral candidates (21.4%).
- Doctoral candidates who are familiar with the guideline for the structured status talk have more often also had a status talk.

Was the University of Jena’s guideline used in the status talk?

- Over a third (35.5%) of doctoral candidates who were aware of the University of Jena’s guideline also used it during the status talk.
- Only 10.8 percent of doctoral candidates state that the guideline was used in the status talk to introduce topics.
- 60 percent of supervisors that are familiar with the guideline also use it. This corresponds to 42.7 percent of all surveyed supervisors.

How were the status talks initiated?

- Doctoral candidates state that status talks most often occur on their own initiative (64.4%). The second most common source of initiative is from the supervisors (45%). The supervision agreement is hardly used for planning status talks (1.8%). Furthermore, just over a quarter of doctoral candidates (27.7%) indicate that there is a regular routine in the work area for status talks.

Were other people involved in the status talks besides the doctoral candidates and their supervisors?

- 61.5 percent of doctoral candidates report that besides themselves, another person, for example the superior, participated in the status talks.
- In 28 percent of cases, besides the doctoral candidates, two other people were involved in the status talk. One in ten doctoral candidates even say that three additional people participated.
- 92.3 percent of doctoral candidates state that the supervisor participated in the status talk. In 24.4 percent, another supervising person was involved, and in 9.9 percent, some other person participated. From the open responses, it becomes evident that this also includes other doctoral candidates, colleagues, or project staff (5.1%).

What topics were discussed in the status talks?

- The „current work progress or partial results in relation to the overall project“ are mentioned by almost all supervisors (96.8%) and doctoral candidates (94.2%) as a discussed topic. Apart from this, doctoral candidates most frequently mention „methodological

difficulties or obstacles in the doctoral process“ (69%) and supervisors „personal difficulties or obstacles of the doctoral candidates in the doctoral process“ (88%).

- Doctoral candidates state that the topic „work-life balance or reconciling the doctorate and family“ (15.2%) was least often discussed in the status talks. According to supervisors, the least mentioned topic is „continuation of employment or other financing of living expenses“ (47.2%).
- The largest differences between doctoral candidates and supervisors can be found in the aspects of „professional opportunities or career goals after the doctorate“ (-47.6 percentage points) and „personal difficulties or obstacles“ of the doctoral candidates (-43.9 percentage points).
- On average, doctoral candidates mention about four topics less than supervisors (6.2 vs. 9.8). Doctoral candidates and supervisors who know the guideline mention more topics that were addressed in the structured status talk (6.8 and 10, respectively).

How are the status talks assessed by doctoral candidates and supervisors?

- The conditions of the meetings (78.7% approval) are especially positively assessed by the doctoral candidates-. They equally often state that status talks help them in planning the next steps (77.6%).
- About every seventh doctoral candidate sees no discernible benefit in the status talk (15.7%), compared to 8 percent of supervisors.
- The least benefit of status talks is seen by doctoral candidates in terms of aspects „planning of financing“ (disagreement with the statement 50.3%), „career goals after the doctorate“ (disagreement 53.4%), and „work-life/family balance“ (disagreement 57.1%).
- Doctoral candidates who see no benefit in status talks, overwhelmingly also see no such benefit in the supervision agreement (60%) either. Those doctoral candidates who see a benefit in the supervision agreement often also see one in the status talks (83.1%).
- Doctoral candidates who have stated that certain topics were addressed in the status talk are also more likely to agree with the statements that the status talks are helpful in relation to these topics. This is especially true for topics for which the status talk is rated as not very helpful in the overall sample.
- Two thirds (69.6%) of supervisors consider status talks helpful for supervising doctoral candidates – not even every tenth views them as an annoying obligation (9.6%).
- A fifth (20.3%) of the supervisors would like to conduct more status talks. More than half of the supervisors (51.2%) see the status talk as an important leadership tool in staff development.

Structured Career Planning Conversations for Postdocs

How many postdocs have already had career conversations?

- About half (51.9%) of the surveyed postdocs have already had a structured career planning conversation.
- 29.5 percent of postdocs with career planning conversations have had three or more talks.
- 86.3 percent of surveyed superiors state that they have had structured career planning conversations with all or most postdocs.

How well known is University Jena's guideline for structured career planning conversations for postdocs?

- 41.9 percent of postdocs are familiar with the guideline for structured career planning conversations at the University of Jena.
- Three-quarters of the postdocs (75%), who are familiar with the guideline, have so far had a structured career planning conversation. Among postdocs who are not familiar with the guideline, only about one-third (35.3%) report this.
- 70.5 percent of superiors are familiar with the guideline. Superiors who know the guideline (92.5%) conduct career planning conversations more frequently with all or most postdocs than those who are not familiar with the guideline (71.4%).

Was the guideline used in the postdoc career planning conversation?

- 75 percent of postdocs who had a career planning conversation and know the guideline used it in the career planning conversation. Half of the postdocs who had a career planning conversation used the guideline to introduce topics into the meeting.
- Of the superiors who know the guideline, over two-thirds (68.7%) use it. About a third of superiors use the guideline for preparation (33.7%), structuring (34.7%), or documenting (34.7%) the career planning conversation.

How were the career planning conversations initiated?

- According to the postdocs, the initiative often comes from their superiors (38.7%) rather than from themselves (20.8%). The most frequent occurrence of a structured career planning conversation, according to the postdocs, however, happens initiated by the administration (42.5%).
- Nearly a fifth of postdocs (20.8%) indicate that there is a routine in their work area for career planning conversations. Also, 10.4% state that the conversation happened spontaneously.
- Superiors report that career planning conversations are most often initiated by themselves (60.9%). The second most common are postdocs as initiators (39.1%). Less than a fifth of superiors (18.5%) name initiation by the administration.

Were other people involved in the career planning conversations besides the postdocs and their superiors?

- According to the postdocs, not even one third (31.4%) had another person, in addition to the superiors, participate in the career planning conversations.
- In 27.4% of the cases, this was another university professor; in 4.7%, it was an external mentor or another person.
- 37% of the superiors report that other people participate in the career conversations.

What topics were addressed in the career conversations for postdocs?

- On topics taken up in career planning conversations, superiors mention on average four more topics than postdocs (10.1 vs. 6.1).
- Postdocs most often mention the topics „evaluation of the current performance „ (75.5%), „continuation of employment and contract duration“ (65.1%), „suitability/potential for an academic career“ (64.2%), and „career opportunities within academia“ (62.3%).
- According to postdocs, the least often discussed topics in their career planning conversations are „switching to another university or research institution“ (8.5%), „work-life

- balance or reconciling career and family“ (16%), „abroad stays or other research stays“ (20.8%), and „career opportunities outside academia“ (22.6%).
- Superiors most frequently address the topics „career opportunities within academia“ (92.4%), „securing their own third-party funding“ (91.3%), and „suitability for an academic career“ (90.2%). The least often addressed are „abroad stays or other research stays“ (57.6%), the „theme and timetable of the habilitation“ (56.5%), and „switching to another university or research institution“ (39.1%).
 - Postdocs mention all of the topics less frequently than their superiors. The smallest gap in the comparisons of mentionings by postdocs and superiors is found with regard to „theme and timetable of the habilitation“ (-12.2 percentage points) and „continuation of employment and contract duration“ (-12.1 percentage points). The largest difference is found with regard to the topics of „work-life balance or reconciling career and family“ (-49.2%) and „career opportunities outside academia“ (-57.8%).

How are the career planning conversations assessed by postdocs and superiors?

- A fifth of postdocs agree with the statement that career planning conversations have no discernible benefit (19.8%). The highest approval from postdocs is that career planning conversations take place in an appropriate setting (81.1%). With some distance, there follows the statement that the career planning conversation has helped clarify continuation of employment and financing (60.4%). The statements least agreed upon are that career planning conversations are helpful for reflecting on inner- and extra-university alternatives to a university professorship (29.2%) and for helping with work-life balance or reconciling career and family (24.6%).
- Surveyed superiors agree most strongly to the statements that structured career planning conversations are helpful for good supervision of postdocs (73.9%) and that they are important for postdocs to place concerns and receive feedback (75%).
- Almost two-thirds of superiors agree that career planning conversations are an important leadership tool (61.1%). A majority of superiors (56.1%) also think that they permanently strengthen the trusting cooperation with the postdocs.
- Only 7.8 percent of superiors see career planning conversations as an annoying obligatory task, and only every tenth agrees with the statement that these are merely formalities. 8.8 percent see no discernible benefit for postdocs in career planning conversations.
- Less than a fifth (18.7%) of superiors would like to conduct career planning conversations more frequently.