A GUIDE TO STAFF DEVELOPMENT DIALOGUES (SDD)

Introduction – Why hold SDD dialogues at Aarhus University?
At Aarhus University, staff development dialogues (SDD) are an annual dialogue between managers and individual members of staff. Staff development dialogue is abbreviated in Danish to MUS (Medarbejderudviklingssamtalen), while the English abbreviation is SDD.

The SDD dialogue focuses on the staff member’s daily working life, and the dialogue gives the manager and the staff member the opportunity for more in-depth dialogue and a reconciliation of mutual expectations as regards the staff member’s goals, tasks, well-being, cooperative relations and professional and personal development. The SDD dialogue thus links the employee’s professional and personal competence development with the development of the workplace.

The dialogue is intended to ensure that the development of the employee’s competences is approached strategically and systematically. Strategically, by ensuring a direction for the competence development that matches the needs of the workplace while supporting the overall strategy of Aarhus University. Systematically, in that the employee and his or her manager complete an agreement form and follow up on what has been agreed in the course of the year. This is also described in the Agreement on Competence Development in the State Sector (Aftalen om Kompetenceudvikling på Statens arbejdspladser). At Aarhus University, there is – as in the rest of the state sector – an obligation that the manager and the staff member hold an SDD dialogue once a year.

Moreover, the SDD dialogue must, according to Aarhus University’s personnel policy, support competence development that helps guarantee the employee good job prospects in the labour market both at and outside the university. In addition, the personnel policy standards as regards professional staff management, professional and personal competence development, an appreciative approach to management and the balancing of family and working life are adhered to through the holding of SDD dialogues.

The manager and the staff member have a shared responsibility for ensuring that the dialogues have an effect. The manager must ensure that the dialogues are held and that it is possible for the necessary competence development to take place. For their part, the employees must work to fulfil their development goals and complete the planned development activities.

In this way, SDD is a mutual development dialogue with a forward-looking focus. SDD does not replace the ongoing daily dialogue and feedback between managers and staff members. Nor is SDD an occasion to focus exclusively on problems at which the manager or the staff member focuses on accumulated criticisms. Such issues must be handled in separate dialogues, if necessary with the involvement of the union representative and AU HR.
Finally, it is important to remember that SDD is not a pay negotiation. For this reason, the SDD dialogues at Aarhus University are held in the autumn so they are quite distinct from and take place at a different time to the pay negotiations which are held in the spring.

**Dialogue guides for manager and staff member**

The SDD concept comprises four dialogue guides: The dialogue guide for technical-administrative staff, the dialogue guide for academic staff, the dialogue guide for managers and, finally, the dialogue guide for academic staff with managerial responsibility.

For every single member of staff, the manager must decide which dialogue guide to use and inform the employee well in advance. The dialogue guide is consultative, i.e. additional questions may be asked, questions may be omitted, and the order of the questions may be changed. However, it should be noted that the concept is based on extensive experience with what works in staff development dialogues at Danish workplaces. In addition, the dialogue guide ensures compliance with the fundamental SDD principles in relation to discussing the past working year, well-being and job satisfaction as well as future tasks and competence development. Basically, the manager must ensure that the dialogue addresses the employee’s past, present and future in the workplace.

In the dialogue guide, the designation ‘unit’ covers the local group to which the employee belongs, where the manager invites the employees for SDD dialogues – regardless of whether they belong to a research group, administrative unit, workshop, laboratory or other unit charged with a common task.

It is the management’s responsibility to define which managers hold SDD dialogues with which members of staff. SDD dialogues can be conducted whether or not the manager conducting the SDD dialogue is authorised to make decisions/promises of a financial nature. As a manager, it may be necessary to examine the unit’s overall competence development needs or seek financial assurances before making any definite promises to individual employees. Here, it is simply important to state in the agreement form when a definite promise can be made, and how to follow up on it.

The SDD materials are also found in Danish.

**SDD and the liaison committees**

It is recommended that SDD be discussed by the local liaison committee well in advance of the annual SDD dialogues. The aim is to discuss SDD as a competence development initiative and to ensure that it is sufficiently clear who is responsible for the SDD dialogues for which groups of employees in the year in question.

The liaison committees play a central role in determining the guidelines for holding the SDD dialogues and for evaluating how the workplace uses the SDD concept. Therefore, AU’s SDD concept is approved by HSU and revised each year based, among other things, on the liaison committee evaluations.
Preparing for SDD – as a manager

It is recommended that the SDD process starts with the manager informing his or her members of staff about the forthcoming SDD dialogues. The information must ensure that the staff are aware of the purpose, framework and schedule for the SDD process, including Aarhus University’s and the unit’s respective goals, strategies and tasks etc. This creates a common frame of reference for managers and employees in advance of the individual dialogues. To provide inspiration for the coming SDD process, the manager can briefly describe the competence development work which has taken place in the unit since the last round of SDD dialogues. This information can be given at a scheduled section meeting, a joint meeting or by email.

If possible, it may be a good idea also for the manager and employees to discuss which competence-related challenges the unit faces, and how these can be addressed.

In preparing for SDD, it is recommended that the manager read ‘Checklist for the manager – the three phases of the SDD process’. The manager then prepares for the individual dialogue using the dialogue guide in AUHRA (Aarhus University’s staff administrative system) to make his or her own notes to take to the dialogue. The IT guide for managers contains more information on using AUHRA in connection with SDD.

As a manager, it is preferable if you have held your SDD dialogue with your own manager before holding SDD dialogues with the staff in the unit. This is a way of ensuring strategic alignment of the employee development efforts with Aarhus University’s objectives. By having attended a staff development dialogue with your own manager, you are likely to have a clearer picture of his or her expectations and the strategic objectives for the unit in the coming year.

Preparing for SDD – as an employee

Before the dialogue, the employee should complete the necessary preparations using the dialogue guide in AUHRA to make his or her own notes to take to the dialogue. The IT guide for employees contains information on using AUHRA in connection with SDD. It is the employee’s job to raise topics which are important to discuss in relation to his or her work. The employee may also want to consider:

- What is particularly important to discuss with my manager?
- What are my ambitions and development wishes?
- How do my present competences and wishes in relation to my future working life harmonise with the objectives and development of my workplace?
- What is my feedback to my manager?

Clarifying the above helps to ensure that you get to talk about what is most important during the dialogue.

Feedback to the manager and employee during SDD dialogue
As part of the SDD process, the intention is that the manager and the employee give each other feedback on, for example, work performance and collaboration during the past year. To ensure that the feedback can be used constructively, it is a good idea to use this simple feedback model:

### Constructive feedback

1. **Describe facts**
   - Start with a specific example, for example a situation or a word-for-word quotation which prompts feedback.
   - Repeat facts without trying to interpret them.

2. **Describe your experience**
   - Your experience is about you, so therefore use expressions such as “I feel ...” and “I am ...”.
   - For example impressed, confused, unsure, sceptical, happy, relieved, inspired, unhappy, proud or angry.
   - Judgemental expressions are not suitable for giving feedback, for example “You are ...”, “You will be ...”.

3. **Say what you want**
   - Say what you want the other person to do.
   - Say what you want and what you want in future rather than what you don’t want.

### Holding SDD – the dialogue

To ensure that an SDD dialogue is characterised by quality, meaning and effect, both the staff member and manager must do their utmost to have a forward-looking and developing dialogue.

A developing dialogue requires that both the manager and employee listen to each other and seek to understand what the other person is saying by asking elaborating questions rather than by arguing.

If it becomes apparent during the dialogue that there is a pressing need for a different type of dialogue (e.g. discussion of problems, coaching etc.), it is agreed when this can take place, after which the SDD dialogue continues according to the dialogue guide.

It is recommended that approx. 1½ hours be allocated for an SDD dialogue.

### The agreement form

The SDD dialogue always ends with the manager and employee agreeing what should be entered in the agreement form for the coming year. The more specific the agreement form, the easier it is to relate to and follow up on. It is important to agree who is responsible for implementing the individual items listed in the form. Is it the manager or employee who is responsible for initiating the activity in question? The agreement form is entered in AUHRA by the employee after the dialogue. If it is possible to do this while concluding the dialogue, by all means do it together. However, based on experience, it is unlikely there will be time. Once the agreement form has been entered by the employee, the manager approves it via AUHRA.

The form is confidential between the manager and the employee, and these are the only two people who can access it. If a new unit manager is appointed, the employee decides for him/herself whether to submit previous agreement forms in paper format to the new manager if it is deemed beneficial for their future collaboration.
Follow-up on SDD
After holding all the SDD dialogues in a unit, it is advisable that the manager provides general feedback to the staff at a follow-up meeting or as an item on the agenda of a meeting which is already scheduled. This is an opportunity for the manager to report back from a general organisational and developmental perspective and outline which particular points the dialogues have raised and how follow-up will be handled in the unit. For reasons of confidentiality, it is important that no reference is made to specific content from the individual dialogues.

The manager also plays an important role in relation to following up on whether the individual development activities are on the right track and whether the employee is benefiting as intended. If some of the activities are not going as expected, the manager and the employee should discuss why, and whether new initiatives are needed. Experience shows that individual follow-up is vital for both the manager and the employee to feel that the SDD process is effective.