

# The PhD SDD Guide

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## SDDs for PhD students at AU

Staff development dialogues (SDDs) are annual dialogues between managers and individual members of staff.

The SDD focuses on the PhD student's daily working life and makes it possible to have a more in-depth dialogue about goals, tasks, well-being, cooperative relations, professional and personal development etc and balance expectations between manager and employee. The SDD thus links the employee's professional and personal competence development with the development of the workplace.

Annual SDDs with PhD students who have AU as their primary workplace are mandatory and should therefore be held from the first year of the PhD student's employment regardless of which PhD degree programme the PhD student is a part of.

As part of the employment procedure, we recommend that the PhD student is informed about what an SDD is and who will be conducting the SDDs in the unit in question (department/centre/school/section etc.).

At AU, there are currently different practices as to who conducts SDDs with PhD students. If you are a PhD student who has recently been employed at AU and you are unsure about when the SDDs are going to be held and who is going to be involved, you can contact your manager or your local HR partner who can help you with this.

## SDD procedure for PhD students

This section provides an example of an SDD procedure during a PhD programme:

**The first year** – The PhD student is invited to a start-up dialogue. The primary focus of this start-up dialogue is to balance expectations concerning cooperation in the research group/the department and future career opportunities.

**The middle year(s)** – One SDD each year. The SDD will focus on work environment, research affiliation, any problems and other non-academic issues. Career opportunities may also be added to the agenda.

**The final year** – A placement/career dialogue at the end of the programme (e.g. with the department head). This dialogue focuses on the time after submission of the dissertation. Which opportunities and wishes does the PhD student have? An evaluation of the entire PhD programme may also be relevant.

## Dialogue guide for manager and PhD student

We have prepared a dialogue guide for the manager and the PhD student. The dialogue guide is intended as a guide only, and the questions should act as a source of inspiration. We recommend that the manager and the PhD student select and adapt the questions based on relevance. The guide and the dialogue guide are also available in Danish.

## Preparing for SDD – as a manager

We recommended that the SDD process starts with the manager informing the PhD student(s) about the forthcoming SDD(s). The information must ensure that the PhD student is aware of the purpose, framework/structure 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 PhD students in advance of the individual dialogues. The manager can also ask the PhD student to prepare for the dialogue by using the questions in the dialogue guide.

## Preparing for SDD – as a PhD student

Before the SDD, the PhD student can prepare by going through the questions in the dialogue guide and make notes which can be useful during the SDD. It is the PhD student's responsibility to raise topics which are important to discuss in relation to his/her work. The PhD student may also want to consider:

- What is particularly important to discuss with my manager?
- What are my ambitions and development wishes?
- 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

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, we recommend 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 gives rise to 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 so ...', 'You always get ...'.

#### 3. Say what it is you want

- Say what you want the other person to do.
- Say what you wish for and what you want in future rather than what you don't want.

## The dialogue

A good staff development dialogue requires a good framework/structure and there must be sufficient time to discuss all relevant issues. We recommend that approx. 1½ hours should be allocated to the dialogue. The contents of the dialogue and the agreement form are confidential, and it is important that the dialogue is open, honest and pleasant. We recommended to use a constructive and appreciative approach, i.e. by focusing on the successful performance of tasks and collaboration in order to be able to build on such successes.

## The agreement form

At the end of the SDD, the manager and the PhD student decide which agreements to enter into the agreement form for the coming year. It is important to be specific when filling in the agreement form, because that will make it easier to relate to the specific items in the form and follow up on them. It is important to agree who is responsible for specific actions in connection with the individual items listed in the form. The form is confidential.

The dialogue guide and the agreement form for PhD students are currently not supported by the IT-system in AUHRA which means that hardcopy versions must be used.

## Follow-up on SDD

When all the SDDs in a unit have been completed, we recommend that the manager gives general feedback e.g. at a follow-up meeting or at a scheduled team meeting. Here, the manager can describe any general issues which have been raised during the dialogues and what will be done to follow up on the SDDs in the unit. **Note:** The SDDs are confidential, so it is important that no reference is made to specific contents from the individual dialogues.

The manager also plays an important role in connection with follow-up to ensure that individual development activities are on the right track and employees are benefiting as intended.

We recommend that the manager and the employee hold a short follow-up dialogue, a so-called 'mini-SDD', approx. 5-6 months after the SDD. Experience shows that a 15-30 minute dialogue has a significant effect. We suggest that you base the dialogue on the agreement form and go through the different items in the form focusing on the following:

- *Which specific agreements, development goals and activities have you written in the agreement form?*
- *What is the status of the agreements, development goals and activities?*
- *Have the activities led to new competences/skills?*
- *Are the new competences/skills used in practice?*
  - *If not, how can you make that happen?*
- *Are any adjustments to your original agreements required?*

In this way, the follow-up dialogue helps to ensure that the time the manager and the employee have invested in the SDD is well spent - that the SDD has an effect and provides real value and not just ends up as a list of items in an agreement form.

# The PhD SDD Dialogue Guide

## Introduction

A good staff development dialogue (SDD) must be well-prepared. Before the dialogue, we recommend that you read 'The PhD SDD Guide'. The dialogue guide that you find in this document is intended as a guide only, and the questions should act as a source of inspiration. The aim is to create a fluent dialogue with both the manager and the PhD student asking the questions which come to them naturally. However, we recommend that the dialogue, as a minimum, addresses the three main themes:

1. What has happened since the last SDD? – A good starting point for talking about the future
2. Well-being and job satisfaction
3. Future tasks and competence development

We recommend to begin the dialogue by establishing a mutual understanding as regards expectations and desired outcome. A number of suggestions for related questions are provided under each main theme in the dialogue guide. At the end of the dialogue, the agreements are summarised and entered into the agreement form. See figure 1 below.

**Figure 1.** Dialogue structure



Remember, an SDD is a mutual development dialogue which focuses on the future. An SDD is not a replacement for an ongoing dialogue and feedback between manager and PhD student.

## Introducing the SDD: Expectations

*The dialogue starts with the manager and the PhD student presenting and agreeing on which themes to prioritise. This could be done in the following way:*

- a. The manager outlines the dialogue framework, i.e. its duration, content and any priorities or special focus areas as well as the expected outcome of the dialogue
- b. The PhD student adds his/her expectations with respect to outcome and any special topics he/she would like to discuss
- c. Together, the manager and the PhD student prioritise the topics and time allocated to the individual themes

## Main theme 1: What has happened since the last SDD? – A good starting point for talking about the future

*Main theme 1 is a dialogue about tasks, results and challenges in the past year. Here, it may be relevant for the PhD student and the manager to give each other feedback on tasks and collaboration. See 'The PhD SDD Guide' for guidance on how to give constructive feedback. The dialogue can be based on these questions:*

- a. Agreements from last year's SDD – which initiatives have been taken and what has the effect been?
- b. Which parts of your job as a PhD student here at the department/unit give you the greatest job satisfaction and why?
- c. Which professional/academic and collaborative tasks and challenges have you had in the past year?
- d. Have the tasks been performed in a satisfactory way? Have you felt that any competences were lacking?
- e. The manager's feedback to the PhD student on the performance of tasks and development points.  
*Recommendation: Focus on what you want more/less of.*
- f. The PhD student's feedback to the manager on the manager's leadership and development points.  
*Recommendation: Focus on what you want more/less of.*

In conclusion, the manager and the PhD student discuss whether the dialogue gave rise to any professional/academic or personal development goals or other agreements which must be entered into the agreement form.

## Main theme 2: Well-being and job satisfaction

*Well-being is a central theme in any SDD and is important to be able to perform tasks in a satisfactory way, develop and achieve one's goals. The dialogue can be based on these questions:*

### *Well-being and job satisfaction*

- a. What motivates and inspires you in your studies?
- b. Do you enjoy being a PhD student?
- c. What makes the unit/department/AU an attractive workplace for you as an employee?
- d. What can be improved?
- e. Do you feel able to maintain a reasonable work/life balance?

### *Well-being and collaboration*

- f. How is your research group functioning?
- g. In which areas is your collaboration with other employees working well?
- h. How is your relationship with other PhD students (academic, social)?
- i. What is the general atmosphere at the department/unit?
- j. How do you contribute to maintaining good working relations?
- k. Do you need to work more with specific people or work with them in a different way (internally or externally)?
- l. What would you like more/less of from me as your manager to improve your sense of well-being?
- m. How is your collaboration with your principal supervisor?
- n. Does the supervision meet your requirements (frequency, form)?
- o. Do you feel that your views, suggestions and any problems are being heard and taken seriously?
- p. Do you have any suggestions for how to strengthen your collaboration with your supervisors?

In conclusion, the manager and the PhD student discuss whether the dialogue gave rise to any professional/academic or personal development goals or other agreements which must be entered into the agreement form.

## Main theme 3: Future tasks and competence development

*Focus is on academic development within research and teaching as well as on future career. Here is a selection of questions which could be relevant to ask. The manager and the PhD student are encouraged to choose the most important questions.*

### *Research*

- a. How would you assess your general academic development?
- b. Is the pace appropriate considering your ambitions?
- c. What is important for you to achieve within the next five years?
- d. Are you in contact with researchers other than your supervisor about academic issues?
- e. Do you have the network that you need?
- f. Which tasks do you like best?
- g. Which tasks do you like least?

### *Teaching*

- h. How do you feel about teaching?
- i. Do you feel prepared for the task?
- j. Do you feel that you have the support that you need?
- k. What is your experience of your interaction with the students?

### *The future*

- l. Which career and development opportunities are of interest to you (internally and externally)?
- m. What motivates you in your job and career choices?
- n. What are your goals for your project for the coming year?
- o. What are your plans and wishes with regard to maintaining and developing academically over the next year (courses, conferences, project work etc.)?

In conclusion, the manager and the PhD student discuss whether the dialogue gave rise to any professional/academic or personal development goals or other agreements which must be entered into the agreement form.

## Conclusion and agreement

At the end of the dialogue, the manager and the PhD student agree on what to write in the agreement form, and when to follow-up on agreement's. The manager and the PhD student can complete the agreement form together at the end of the dialogue. Alternatively, the PhD student can complete the form and keep it after it has been approved by the manager.

# PhD SDD agreement form

During or immediately after the SDD, the PhD student writes the agreements into this agreement form.

## Main topics of the dialogue

Here, the main topics of the dialogue can be outlined. It is not necessary to produce detailed minutes of the dialogue.

	<b>A. Agreement</b>	<b>B. Activities</b>	<b>Responsible</b>	<b>D. When</b>
	Describe the agreement. This might take the form of professional/academic and personal development goals or other agreements	Describe the activities which the agreement involves in general terms	Name	When to follow up the first time?
1				
2				
3				
4				