

Professional Development Support for PhD Students and Postdocs

Guideline for Line Managers and Supervisors

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Professional Development Support for PhD Students and Postdocs

This guideline for line managers and supervisors shows the main milestones in the employment cycle of PhD students and postdocs and is intended as a manual for ensuring optimum support and outlining the responsibilities.

1. Philosophy of the feedback culture at PSI

It is very important to foster a strong feedback culture between the PhD student and postdoc and their line managers and supervisors. This enhances the quality of the scientific work (results) and prepares young researchers for their next successful career step.

Line managers and supervisors assist PhD students and postdocs in a task-oriented way and support them actively in their personal and professional development. They maintain a trusting and open dialogue, provide regular feedback and encourage initiative. They also take responsibility for setting out tasks on the basis of the research plan/project together with the PhD student/postdoc and review this regularly.

Holding regular and systematic meetings is one of the most important management tools. This promotes mutual trust and is an important foundation for a successful working relationship.

2. Overview of the employment cycle

Employment cycle for PhD students and postdocs (see [leaflet](#))

3. Roles and responsibilities

Roles and responsibilities for PhD students and postdocs (see [leaflet](#))

Responsibilities when holding the meetings

The meetings during the trial period, the annual progress review, the meeting to evaluate contract extension and the exit interview are generally the responsibility of the direct line manager. In the case of PhD students and postdocs supervised by a scientist (supervisor), the supervisor may also attend the meeting. The line manager is also authorised to delegate these meetings to the supervisor. It must be noted here that the meetings must be discussed in advance with the direct line manager. The following text only mentions the direct line manager as the key person responsible. However, the meetings can always be delegated in line with the principle outlined above. The supervisors receive special training for these meetings in a workshop organised by PSI. This workshop is obligatory for all scientists.

4. Milestones and actions

4.1 Joining the institute

When the PhD student/postdoc joins the institute, the direct line manager provides an induction schedule (form is sent by HR to the line manager) that defines tasks for the first three months. These are reviewed and discussed after the first week, half way through the trial period and at the end of the trial period. The direct line manager also appoints a mentor for the new employee to introduce them to everyday life at PSI and to support them with general questions. If the direct line manager does not supervise the PhD student/postdoc himself or herself, he or she appoints a supervisor (senior scientist). On joining the institute, the PhD student/postdoc will be instructed clearly on the various reference persons (thesis advisor, line manager, supervisor, mentor) and their respective responsibilities.

4.2 Trial period

The trial period lasts three months, with the option of extending it up to six months. It allows both parties to review their decision, so that at the end of the trial period there is certainty that the tasks can be fulfilled and that the individual approach conforms to PSI's principles. The trial period meeting (form is sent by HR to the line manager) is conducted by the direct line manager. The direct line manager assesses the quality and quantity of the performed work, social/soft skills and method skills and makes the decision regarding contractual employment. After the trial period meeting, the planning of the tasks for the following months in line with the annual progress review (see No. 6 of form [annual progress review](#)) commences. This planning is important to familiarise the PhD student/postdoc with his or her tasks before the annual progress review.

4.3 Induction period

After six months, the PhD student/postdoc has the opportunity to assess his/her induction period. The line manager, mentor and HR are informed of the outcome of the assessment using a standardised process. Important instructions are followed and can trigger measures. The form is sent to the employee by HR.

4.4 Developing the research plan (applies only to PhD students)

Within six to twelve months, the PhD student must work together with the supervisor to prepare a research plan in line with the rules of the university and submit this plan to the university. If the university does not require a [research plan](#), the plan is submitted to the thesis advisor.

4.5 Research Integrity

All PhD students at PSI are required to attend the course "Research integrity information for PhD students" within no more than 18 months of commencing employment. If they fail to attend the course within this period, the extension of the PhD contract is called into question. Postdocs who have not yet attended any such training are also required to complete the courses on this topic offered at PSI.

4.6 Evaluating contract extension

Time limits for PhD students

PhD students start with a one-year contract. The contract can be extended by two years depending on:

- fulfilment of the individual entrance criteria in line with the PhD directive at the university where the thesis advisor works. If entrance exams are required, these must be passed within the first year of employment;
- a positive performance assessment (internally at PSI and by the external PhD or examining board if mandatory in the university area responsible);
- full-time guidance and supervision of the PhD student by the thesis advisor

Based on the rules of the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), payment for the PhD at PSI is limited to a maximum of four years. The PhD student will be notified of the decision regarding a temporary extension or exit by the direct line manager at a meeting two to three months before the end of the contract and subsequently in writing. The corresponding form “End of contract” is sent to the direct line manager by HR three months before the end of the contract.

Time limits for postdocs

The maximum employment period for postdocs is four years (they generally start with a two-year contract). The postdoc will be notified of the decision regarding a temporary extension or exit by the direct line manager at a meeting six months before the end of the contract. The corresponding form “End of contract” is sent to the direct line manager by HR six months before the end of the contract.

4.7 Regular meetings

Jour fixe

Between the milestone meetings (such as trial period, annual progress review, evaluation of contract extension etc.) with the direct line manager, the supervisor keeps in regular contact with the PhD student/postdoc to support the progress of the dissertation or research project. These meetings can be held ad hoc or scheduled as a jour fixe.

Development/career meeting

The PhD student/postdoc relies on regular feedback from the line managers. This is important in order to discuss any development points and to set out corresponding measures (e.g. attending a course on presentation techniques or scientific writing). The line manager is responsible for providing this support. It is also important for the line manager to provide career support by exchanging experiences. There are no prospects for PhD students to be hired at PSI subsequently, while the prospects for postdocs are only very slight. This means that it is especially important to provide career support in the form of advice and information on various possibilities.

4.8 Annual progress review

4.8.1 Preparing for the meeting

The annual progress review is carried out by the direct line manager. The most important prerequisite for a successful annual progress review is good preparation. The following communication rules must be observed during the meeting itself:

- Active listening (queries, confirmation)
- Ask open questions (what, how ...)
- Take employees seriously
- Feedback rules: objective, calm, appropriate, specific, honest
- Accept feedback as an opportunity

The individual preparatory steps for the direct line manager are:

- Prepare an assessment of skills using the [“Annual progress review”](#) form. The tasks based on the research plan or project plan in the previous year, the job description, observations during the year and any information or feedback from third parties such as supervisors, the thesis advisor, project partners etc. serve as a basis for this assessment.
- Make decisions on development measures and career development
- Develop new plan for tasks based on the research plan or project (PhD student/postdoc and direct line manager separately)
- Provide input to PhD student/postdoc for the independent preparation for the annual progress review (at least two weeks in advance) with the help of the “Annual progress review” form, the research/project plan and the tasks based on the previous year

An example is provided on the intranet to help with the preparation of the annual progress review (see [exemplar](#)).

4.8.2 Content of the annual progress review

Assessment of skills

The basis for the assessment is primarily the activities pursuant to the job description and the tasks based on the research or project plan in the previous year (see No. 6 of [“Annual progress review”](#) form). The assessment should relate to the entire year and not only recent weeks. The line managers instruct the PhD students/postdocs to contribute details on their situation and opinion and their own assessment of how well they are fulfilling their tasks. They use the same “Annual progress review” form for this. In their assessment, the line managers mention both strengths and areas that require development measures. There are three categories for this: “outstanding”, “good” and “to be improved”. They provide detailed explanations for their assessment. The following aspects are assessed: “Knowledge base”, “Personal effectiveness”, “Working with others” and “Influence and impact”. The aspect “Influence and impact” is assessed only for PhD students from year 3 onward and for postdocs. The aspects to be assessed are based on the “Researcher Development Framework RDF”. The RDF is a professional framework for planning, further development and assistance of personal and professional development of researchers at university level. You can find the exact description of the skills using the following link ([vitae-researcher-development-framework](#)).

Overall assessment

The overall assessment of PhD students/postdocs does not affect their salary level. The aim of the assessment is to support the development of the employees. To give the PhD student an indication of the progress of his or her dissertation and the postdoc an indication of the progress of his or her research project, we recommend summarising the assessment in a written statement.

Personal and professional development

This point relates to development measures as part of a post at PSI with a one-year perspective. Based on the result of the “Assessments of skills”, the category “to be improved” shows which aspects require a development measure. This is where the line manager plans specific basic and further training or workplace support together with the employee in order to strengthen the skills that need to be developed. The measures and the timing of their implementation must be set out in writing here. The measures set out in the prior year are also reviewed.

Career development

The line manager is also responsible for supporting the PhD student/postdoc with career-related matters. This relates to the long-term perspective of three to five years. PhD students must leave PSI after their period of employment. Postdocs can apply internally at PSI for a position as a scientist. However, the majority of postdocs also leave PSI after the end of their employment contract. The important aspect here is to encourage the PhD student/postdoc to think about their career after joining PSI. The line managers and supervisors can be on hand to open doors or give advice. It is also important to pass on information on career support opportunities internally at PSI. At the annual progress review, the line managers can first ask about the employee’s aims and wishes. They can then give their recommendations based on the assessment. The objective is for each party to know what the other party is thinking and ultimately agree on measures in writing under this point.

Employee’s feedback to line manager and/or supervisor

The annual progress review should serve as a mutual status review. PhD students/postdocs also have the opportunity to give feedback to their line managers. The important aspect in this context is for the PhD student/postdoc to perceive an open atmosphere so that they can provide honest feedback and thus help to improve the working relationship.

Tasks based on the research plan / project

It is important for the line manager and the PhD student/postdoc to use the annual progress review to plan the tasks for the coming year and set these out with binding effect. The planning is based on the research or project plan. Clear planning enhances the line manager’s ability to manage and provides motivation and support for the employee.

The necessary scope and flexibility must be provided when setting out the tasks. The core activities of the young researchers should not be limited by tasks that are too specific and short term. The tasks are classified into different categories:

Scientific tasks	e.g. individual project steps, data collection, data analysis, presentations, exchange of knowledge etc.
Planned manuscripts	e.g. planned publications
Planned academic training	e.g. planning participation in conferences, summer/winter schools, posters etc.
Additional tasks	Tasks outside of their own dissertation or own research project to support team members or the line manager; in the case of PhD students, this accounts for max. 20% of their working time

The tasks must be formulated clearly. It should be possible for the employee to complete the tasks with an appropriate amount of effort and for the line manager to review and assess this. Also, realistic deadlines should be set for completing the tasks.

Signatures / Mailing list

The [“Annual progress review”](#) form is signed by the meeting facilitator (line manager or supervisor) and the PhD student/postdoc. If the line manager has delegated the meeting to the supervisor, the line manager signs the form in acknowledgement. The employees confirm with their signature that they have acknowledged the status review and the assessment and that this was discussed with the line manager/supervisor. The line manager keeps the original form and gives a copy to the employee, supervisor and thesis advisor (if applicable). The content of the annual progress review is confidential and cannot be made available to unauthorised third parties. The next-higher level of line managers and Personnel Management are authorised to inspect this content. The retention period is 5 years. In the event of changes in management, the key documents from the reviews must be handed over to the new line manager in an orderly fashion.

4.9 Exit interview

Around three months before the PhD student/postdoc leaves, the line manager holds the exit interview in combination with the annual progress review. The focus is on assessing the skills pursuant to the [“Annual progress review”](#) form, career development after dissertation/after postdoc as well as a final assessment of the employment at PSI (positive aspects of the role, suggested changes, work satisfaction, assessment by line manager/supervisor) by the PhD student/postdoc.

The line manager or the supervisor writes a [“Letter of Reference”](#) and gives this to the PhD student/postdoc no later than on their last working day at PSI. It must be ensured that all PSI materials have been handed back upon exit. This is confirmed with the signature of the line manager or supervisor on the materials return list.

5. Further information

If you have any questions regarding the process, please get in touch with the [Human Resources Management](#).