UNIVERSITÄT BIELEFELD

GrACe | Graduate and Academic Career Development Centre

Career Development Discussions

A Guide for Professors, PhD Students and Postdocs: Discussing Career Development and Future Career Prospects



Leadership and Collaboration in Academia

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Who is this guide for?

This guide is intended for **PhD students and postdocs, as well as professors and others who directly supervise or support them**. It is designed to help both sides prepare for and conduct career development discussions and to jointly explore possible next steps in their academic and professional development.
The guide can be used by PhD students and postdocs to prepare for the conversation, and by supervisors to structure and facilitate it.

Further Resources on Career Development Discussions

Additional resources are available for download at www.uni-bielefeld.de/grace/leadership-collaboration:

- ✓ **"Career Development Discussions at a Glance"**
  This short document provides a quick overview, including a concise summary of this guide as well as a sample structure for conducting a career development discussion, with sections for documenting key outcomes.

- ✓ **"Career Development Discussions Toolbox"**
  This comprehensive collection of resources is gradually expanded and provides practical support for preparing and conducting career development discussions. It includes:

  - Guiding Questions for Career Development Discussions
  - Preparing for the Discussion: A Guide for Supervisors
  - Preparing for the Discussion: A Guide for PhD students and Postdocs
  - Record of Outcomes (Template)
  - Information Sheet: Academic Career Paths & Alternatives to a Professorship
  - Academic Profile Worksheet
  - Information Sheet: *Career Service* Support for PhD students and Postdocs Exploring Careers Outside Academia
  - Overview of Further Relevant Advisory and Support Services
  - Resources on Gender Competence
  - Overview of Other Conversation Formats
  - Optional Additional Questions: Working Conditions & Responsibilities
  - Optional Additional Questions: Leadership & Collaboration
  - Optional Additional Questions: Supervision

1. Creating Perspectives: The Importance of Career Development Discussions in Academia

Developing clear career perspectives and attractive academic career paths for PhD students and postdocs is becoming increasingly important in an increasingly competitive environment – not only for researchers themselves, but also for Bielefeld University as an attractive place for academic talent. Regular, structured conversations between supervisors and the PhD students and postdocs they support are an important element in developing career perspectives. Career Development Discussions can provide valuable support by encouraging dialogue about individual goals, expectations, and development opportunities, creating transparency, strengthening motivation, and helping to structure supervisory relationships. This guide is intended to support these conversations.

As part of the support provided to PhD students and postdocs during their qualification phase at Bielefeld University, Career Development Discussions should take place regularly (see page 4 for further information on the relevant requirements) to help ensure high-quality supervision and support. In many cases, this already reflects established practice, and comparable conversations may already be taking place under different names or in different formats. This guide is intended to support the effective implementation of such conversations and provides a framework for making the associated expectations and requirements clearer.

Ideally, Career Development Discussions should be conducted in line with the culture and values of Bielefeld University. Equal opportunities and diversity, compatibility of work and family responsibilities, health, and inclusion are important considerations in this context. Bielefeld University values and supports both academic careers and careers in business and wider society. This guide can be used by supervisors as well as PhD students and postdocs to prepare for Career Development Discussions. In addition, everyone involved can draw on a wide range of target-group-specific training opportunities, peer exchange formats, and advisory services offered by the Graduate and Academic Career Development Centre (GrACe) and other university units: www.uni-bielefeld.de/grace

2. What Is a Career Development Discussion?

Objectives

A Career Development Discussion is a structured and confidential conversation that, when both participants prepare well and have a clear understanding of its objectives, can enrich the supervision process. It is intended to encourage researchers in qualification phases to reflect on their individual career plans and professional profile at an early stage and to further develop that profile. In this way, the conversation supports a realistic assessment of career prospects both within and outside academia.

Discussing career goals, challenges, and development opportunities early and systematically during an academic qualification phase increases transparency and planning certainty for both sides and helps clarify mutual expectations. In their role as supervisors, professors can draw on their own career experience as well as their experience of supporting others in their career development. This

experience can provide valuable input for Career Development Conversations and help identify, at an early stage, whether adjustments to a researcher's future priorities or career direction may be beneficial. This, in turn, can also help reduce stress during a particularly demanding phase of a researcher's career.

Target Group & Facilitation

As a rule, a Career Development Conversation is a one-to-one meeting between a supervisor and a PhD student or postdoc. The supervisor generally facilitates the conversation, providing structure and guiding the discussion. If needed and agreed upon by both parties, the Counselling Center for staff and management can be consulted to support the preparation or facilitation of the conversation.
During the conversation, supervisors contribute their expertise regarding academic career paths in their respective disciplines. Based on the individual plans and career-related questions of the PhD student or postdoc, supervisors provide feedback on their profile to date and discuss how it may align with potential career paths in the respective discipline or related fields.
Career Development Discussions can be complemented by referrals to other advisory services. These include, for example, GrACe for questions relating to profile development and professional development opportunities for academic career paths, and the Career Service at the ZLL for questions relating to careers outside academia and the development of a profile geared towards such career paths. An overview of relevant advisory services is provided in the Toolbox.

Frequency & Duration

A dedicated time slot of at least one hour should be scheduled well in advance for the Career Development Discussion. The frequency of these conversations can, for example, be specified in the supervision agreement or agreed upon at the end of the first Career Development Discussion. To provide continuous support throughout the process and allow for timely adjustments where necessary, a Career Development Discussion should take place at least once a year. One option is to combine the Career Development Discussion with a regular supervision meeting. If the participants also have a manager–employee relationship in addition to the supervisory relationship, the Career Development Discussion may also be combined with the annual staff appraisal interview (see the Toolbox for further information).
When combining different types of conversations, it is important to ensure that sufficient time and attention are given to the specific purpose of the Career Development Discussion – namely, providing guidance and strategic advice, including "insider knowledge", on developing an individual profile with a view to career opportunities in academia. These topics should not be overshadowed, for example, by the assessment of the researcher's qualification work, such as subject-specific or performance-related feedback and the setting of objectives, which may form part of a regular supervision meeting.

Mandatory Nature:

Regular Career Development Discussions are mandatory at Bielefeld University and are structurally embedded in the Framework Doctoral Regulations (*Rahmenpromotionsordnung*, RPO) and the Guidelines for Good Doctoral Supervision (*Leitlinien guter Betreuung von Promotionen*).
Section 7, "Supervision", of the Framework Doctoral Regulations (RPO, version 06/2023) lists "career development/perspective discussions" among the "tasks and obligations of the supervisor(s)". In accordance with the DFG's recommendations for drafting supervision agreements, these are to be included in the supervision or doctorate agreement.

(Official Gazette of Bielefeld University – *Verkündungsblatt Universität Bielefeld – Amtliche Bekanntmachungen*, Vol. 52, No. 7, p. 168)

Topics & Distinction from Other Types of Conversation

A Career Development Discussion should be tailored to the individual and adapted to the specific characteristics of the respective discipline. Depending on the stage at which the conversation takes place, the particular circumstances, and whether it is combined with other types of conversation, different areas of focus may be appropriate. In general, a Career Development Discussion should address the following topics:

- **Career goals and planning:** PhD students / postdocs describe their career aspirations and goals (if they have already identified any). These may relate to an academic career or to career paths outside academia.
- **Career-relevant information:** Career-relevant achievements and experience to date are reviewed and reflected on together. Areas of focus may include, for example, research projects, scholarships and fellowships, publications, presentations / conferences, teaching, academic self-governance, leadership experience where applicable, and other interdisciplinary skills and qualifications.
- **Funding opportunities & support:** Where relevant, PhD students / postdocs identify internal and external funding opportunities (e.g. scholarships) and / or other forms of support (e.g. advisory services) for their research and career development, preferably in advance of the conversation. Supervisors may provide additional information and, where appropriate, discuss possible next steps.
- **Career development:** Taking into account the career goals expressed and the career-relevant achievements and experience to date, possible career paths within academia (and, where relevant, outside academia) are discussed, along with opportunities for supporting further career development. Where appropriate, PhD students / postdocs can be referred to central university services, such as the Career Service (ZLL) for advice on career opportunities outside academia or the Graduate and Academic Career Development Centre (GrACe) for advice on academic careers.

A Career Development Discussion cannot cover all factors that may influence career planning. Supervisors are primarily experts in their own academic discipline.

Factors such as family circumstances, care responsibilities or family planning, as well as a person's (mental) health, chronic illnesses, health-related limitations or disabilities, can play an important role in career planning. If advice or support is needed in these areas, PhD students / postdocs can contact, for example, the Accessibility Services (ZAB), the Family Service, the Health Management team (Department of University Culture, Health and Diversity), or the Councelling Center for staff and management (see Toolbox).

International PhD students / postdocs often face particular challenges when considering their future prospects that extend beyond traditional career-related questions. These may include questions concerning residence status, visa extensions, or long-term career prospects in Germany – areas in which supervisors do not generally provide advice. PhD students / postdocs can make use of existing advisory services, such as legal advice provided by the AStA or support from the International Office. Developing German language skills through courses offered by the Language Centre (FSZ) can also be an important element in planning a long-term career in Germany (see Toolbox).

In practice, conversations about developing career prospects in academia cannot always be separated from the issue of fixed-term employment contracts, which are common in academia. Questions concerning future employment prospects, possible continued employment, or alternative sources of funding should be taken into account when planning career development goals. Depending on whether there is also an employment relationship between the participants and / or whether the supervisor is also the PhD student's or postdoc's manager, they can jointly consider whether these issues are better addressed as part of the Career Development Discussion or during the staff appraisal interview – unless combining the two types of conversation is considered appropriate in the first place.

Conversation Setting, Approach & Confidentiality

Career Development Discussions should always be treated as confidential in order to facilitate open and honest dialogue. Information must not be shared without the explicit consent of the PhD student / postdoc. A quiet and private setting, sufficient time between the conversation and subsequent appointments, and a constructive, professional approach all contribute to creating an appropriate and confidential atmosphere. Further guidance on conducting effective conversations can be found in Chapter 5 of this guide.

Depending on the circumstances, a Career Development Discussion may be a challenging situation for a PhD student / postdoc, particularly when it involves critical feedback or an assessment that differs negatively from their own self-assessment. Supervisors should therefore be aware of and reflect on the power associated with their position and handle it with sensitivity in order to reduce potential strain. If needed, confidential support on conducting such conversations can be obtained from the Councelling Center for staff and management.

Bielefeld University is committed to equal opportunities, and this commitment should also be reflected in the support provided for career development. Supervisors are therefore encouraged to reflect, prior to the conversation, on their own assumptions and potential unconscious gender biases, as well as on other dimensions of inequality that may contribute to disadvantage. Numerous studies have shown that the proportion of women decreases progressively at successive stages of academic careers (the "leaky pipeline"). Career Development Discussions can therefore play an important role in supporting excellent women researchers in particular. Supervisors can draw on the advisory services and resources provided by the Equal Opportunities Office and the Disabled Persons' Representation (SBV) for support in this area. Further resources and formats relating to gender competence can be found in the Toolbox.

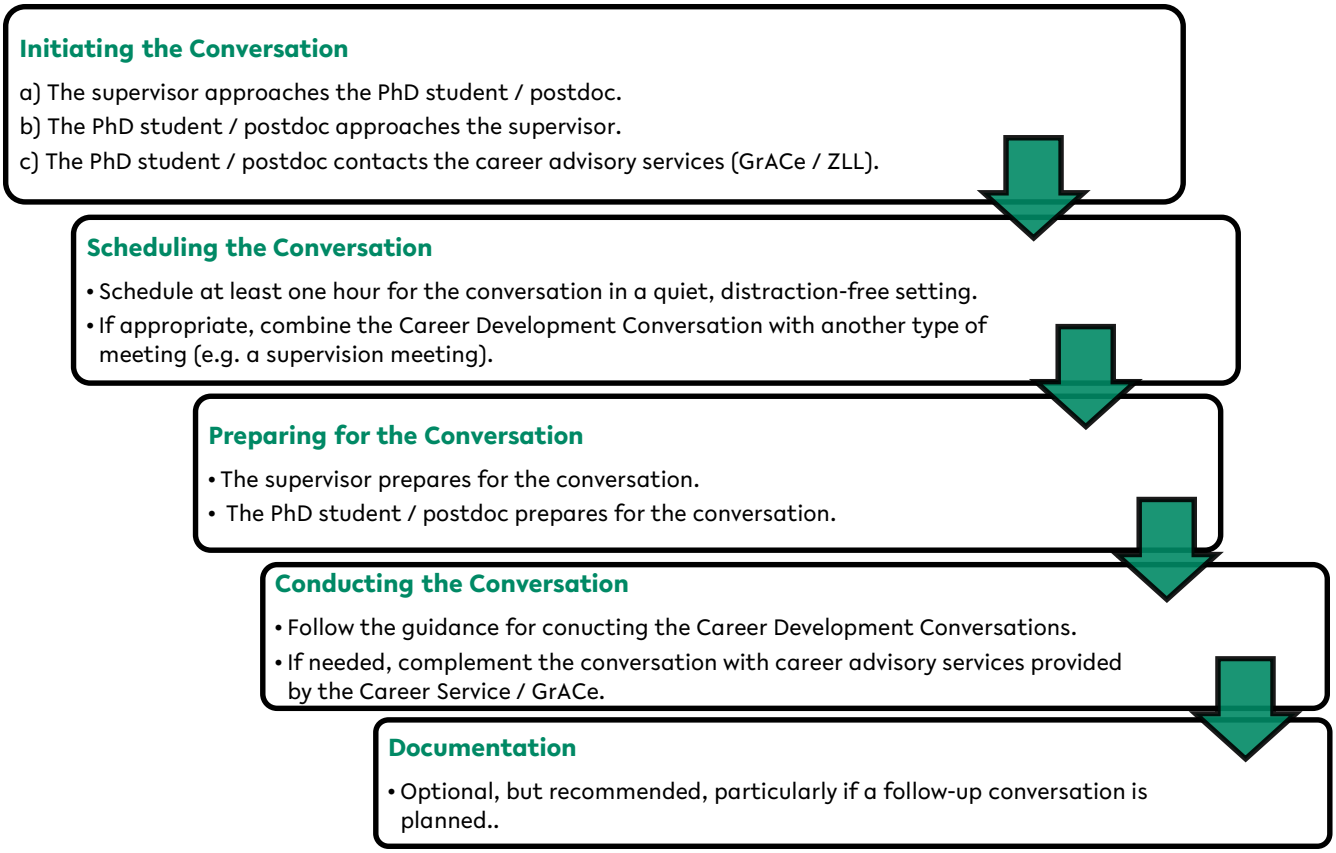
Documenting the Conversation

It is recommended that the key outcomes of the Career Development Discussion be documented. This makes it easier to jointly review developments since the previous conversation and assess progress towards agreed goals during follow-up conversations.

A written record can also be useful immediately after the conversation to ensure that both participants have a shared understanding of what was discussed and agreed upon, thereby helping to prevent potential misunderstandings.

A template for documenting the outcomes of the conversation is available in the Toolbox.

3. The Process at a Glance



Regular Career Development Discussions are recommended. PhD students / postdocs are free to decide whether they wish to have a Career Development Discussion with their supervisor. Alternatively or in addition, they can make use of career advisory services provided by the Career Service (careers outside academia) or GrACe (academic careers).

If a PhD student / postdoc requests a Career Development Discussion, supervisors are required to conduct such a conversation in accordance with the General Regulation of Doctoral Studies (RPO).

4. The Role of Supervisors

In a Career Development Discussion, the supervisor is responsible in particular for:

- conducting the Career Development Discussion in a structured and professional manner – support materials and advisory services can be used to prepare for the conversation if needed;
- outlining general, discipline-specific perspectives on academic career paths;
- providing an assessment of the PhD student's / postdoc's current profile with regard to academic career paths in the supervisor's own discipline, based on their knowledge of the PhD student's / postdoc's potential demonstrated to date and current stage of development;

- providing feedback on how well the current or intended profile aligns with career opportunities in academia – at Bielefeld University, elsewhere in Germany, or internationally – and with the associated requirements;

- providing feedback and guidance on publications, teaching, committee work, conferences and academic events, as well as, where relevant, professional development activities or other interdisciplinary skills and qualifications, with a view to an academic career;

- sharing strategic advice and "insider knowledge" on how to further develop the individual profile and improve prospects for an academic career;

- referring the PhD student / postdoc to relevant advisory services where appropriate (e.g. GrACe or the Career Service at ZLL; an overview of further advisory services is provided in the Toolbox).

5. Practical Guidance: Conducting the Discussion & Creating the Right Setting

The following guidance is primarily intended for supervisors, who are responsible for facilitating the conversation. However, it is equally relevant to PhD students / postdocs. Ultimately, both participants share responsibility for ensuring a successful Career Development Discussion based on mutual respect and dialogue on an equal footing, and both can actively contribute by following the principles of effective communication.

- **Active listening:** Show genuine interest in what the PhD student / postdoc is saying and give the conversation your full attention. Avoid distractions and interruptions, for example from colleagues, phone calls, or emails.
- **Clarity and precision:** Communicate as clearly and unambiguously as possible to avoid misunderstandings. Use clear and accessible language. If in doubt, ask follow-up questions to ensure mutual understanding and encourage the other person to ask questions as well.
- **Respectful communication:** Treat the other person with appreciation, fairness, respect, and courtesy. Maintain a professional and objective tone, including when discussing differing views or points of disagreement.
- **Empathy:** Make an effort to understand the PhD student's / postdoc's perspective throughout the conversation and to consider the situation from their point of view.

- **Constructive feedback:** Suggest specific opportunities for improvement and provide feedback in an objective, solution-oriented manner. As a general rule, it can be helpful to focus more on the desired outcome and on developing solutions than on analysing what went wrong.

- **A positive approach to mistakes:** Create an environment in which mistakes, omissions, and poor decisions can be discussed without fear. This also applies to thoughts about discontinuing a PhD or changing career direction. It can be helpful to view such experiences

and considerations as legitimate parts of a learning and development process, both within and beyond academia.

- **Time management:** Allow sufficient time to discuss important topics while also setting a clear endpoint for the discussion. Keep track of the key topics and avoid becoming overly focused on details or going over the same points repeatedly. Preparing a general structure in advance can help ensure that all relevant topics are covered (suggestions are provided in the Toolbox).
- **Confidentiality:** All matters discussed during the conversation must be treated as confidential and remain between the participants. Information may only be shared with the explicit consent of the PhD student / postdoc.

  Documentation: At the end of the conversation, jointly record the key points and agree on when they should be revisited. Where possible, clearly document responsibilities and deadlines for agreed actions and next steps. Allow sufficient time for this part of the conversation when scheduling the meeting. It may also be useful to take notes during the conversation; ideally, agree at the outset who will be responsible for doing so. A template for documenting the outcomes is available in the Toolbox.

6. Support & Contact

To support the integration of Career Development Discussions into everyday academic practice, the Graduate and Academic Career Development Centre (GrACe) and other Bielefeld University services offer a wide range of resources and advisory services:

- **„Career Development Discussions Toolbox":** A comprehensive collection of resources providing practical support for Career Development Discussions, including guidance on preparing for the conversation, guiding questions for different areas of focus, a template for documenting the conversation, information sheets on career paths after the PhD, and information on advisory services and other conversation formats.

- **(Tailored) staff development formats (including PEP):** Peer exchange formats, training sessions, workshops, and other formats can be organised according to specific needs. Advice on the Career Development Discussion method is also available.

- **Optional career advice to complement the Career Development Discussion:** PhD students / postdocs can make use of career advisory services provided by GrACe for academic careers or by the Career Service for careers outside academia.

- **Confidential case consultation or facilitation by the Counselling Center:** Career Development Discussions can be prepared with colleagues from the Councelling Center for staff and management, who can also facilitate the discussion if needed. This may be particularly helpful when planning a Career Development Discussion for the first time or when a difficult or potentially conflictual conversation is anticipated. The Counselling Center can also support supervisors in reflecting on their own role. The Counselling Center operates independently and is not bound by instructions, thereby ensuring strict confidentiality.

For any questions or individual support needs relating to Career Development Discussions, GrACe serves as the central point of contact and, where appropriate, will refer you to the relevant Bielefeld University service.

Feedback & Further Development:

- *Would you like to share feedback on your experience with Career Development Conversations?*
- *Have you found the materials helpful?*
- *Where do you see potential for improvement?*
- *What discipline-specific or other adaptations may be needed?*
- *Are there any additional support, advisory, or training opportunities that you feel are missing?*
- *...?*

Our aim is to provide you with this guide and the Career Development Conversations Toolbox as practical resources that can be readily integrated into everyday academic practice. We would like to continue developing these resources together with you and therefore welcome your feedback.

You can contact us at: grace@uni-bielefeld.de

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