GRADUATE CENTER · TU ILMENAU

Conversation Guide*

Supervision Agreement

For doctoral researchers and supervisors · Version 2026

This guide accompanies the conversation about the supervision agreement between doctoral researchers and their supervisors. It describes how the conversation can be structured, which topics both sides should discuss together and how to bring it to a good close. The guide applies equally to both sides.

> *The conversation about the supervision agreement is not a bureaucratic formality. It is the foundation of your work together. Use the time to create genuine clarity: about expectations, timelines and how you will work with each other.*

1 Before the Conversation

Both sides prepare

Good preparation makes the difference. Each of you should set aside 20 to 30 minutes before the meeting to go through the following points.

Doctoral researchers:

- What is my doctoral topic? Is it already defined clearly enough?
- What time frame do I have in mind?
- What support do I really need: subject-specific feedback, writing advice, conference participation?
- Which questions about the agreement have I not yet answered?

Supervisors:

- How much time can I realistically invest in this supervisory relationship?
- How would I like to give feedback: in writing, verbally, at what intervals?
- Are there structural conditions in my field that I need to communicate clearly?
- What are my expectations regarding independent work?

Arrange the meeting well in advance. Plan at least 90 minutes. The conversation deserves the time.

2 During the Conversation: Step by Step

Step 1: Settle in and clarify the goal

Start with a brief introduction. Who sent the invitation? What is the goal of today's meeting? Make sure both sides have the same expectations of the meeting.

- Briefly introduce yourselves if you do not yet know each other well.
- State the purpose: "Today we will finalise the supervision agreement together and clarify any open questions."
- Agree on a structure: Which points would you like to discuss, and in what order?

Step 2: Discuss the doctoral project (§§ 1 and 2)

Go through the topic and the work plan together. This is the substantive core of the conversation.

- **Title and form of the dissertation:** monograph or cumulative (publication-based) dissertation?
- **Timeline:** define concrete milestones for the first 12 months.
- **Plan a buffer:** What happens if the project needs more time than planned?
- **Make additional duties transparent:** How much time goes into teaching, project work or other tasks?

Step 3: Discuss rights and responsibilities (§§ 3 and 4)

This part is crucial. Say openly what you expect from each other, and listen.

The doctoral researcher commits to	The supervisor commits to
Pursuing the doctoral goal within the agreed time frame	Guiding the topic and goal so that they remain achievable within the timeline
Reporting on progress in writing or verbally every x months	Giving feedback on drafts and progress every x months
Reviewing adherence to the timeline once a year	Communicating relevant developments in the field promptly
Following the rules of good research practice (DFG Code of Conduct)	Supporting conference participation and publications in terms of content and organisation

Ask each other: "What do you need from me to make this work?" Listen carefully and write down the answers.

Step 4: Framework conditions and conflict management (§§ 5 to 9)

These sections are not mere formalities. They govern what happens when things get difficult.

- **Workplace and infrastructure:** Is it clear which resources are available?
- **Research practice:** Are both sides familiar with the DFG guidelines? Are there open questions about the use of AI tools or research data?
- **Conflict management:** The ombudsperson of TU Ilmenau and the doctoral researchers' representative body are established points of contact. Make this explicit.
- **Family friendliness:** Are there personal circumstances that both sides need to be aware of?

Step 5: Bring the conversation to a close

End the conversation deliberately. Summarise the key points before you sign.

1. Repeat the most important agreements: Who does what by when?
2. Clarify open points: What still needs to be submitted?
3. Set the next appointment: When will the first feedback meeting take place?
4. Sign the agreement. Each party receives a copy.

> *Even if not every point is settled right away: a good first conversation is the foundation for everything that follows.*

3 Handling Difficult Moments

Sometimes these conversations do not go smoothly. That is normal. Here are three situations and how you can handle them.

Differing expectations

If you notice that your ideas are far apart, say so openly. "I hear that we see this differently. Can we make it more concrete?" Avoid judgements; describe facts and observations.

Uncertainty about the timeline

If time frames seem unrealistic, raise it during the conversation, not afterwards. An agreement that nobody can keep protects nobody.

Imbalance in communication

If one side stays silent or evades, ask. "What would you need to be able to raise this openly?" Constructive feedback focuses on strengths and concrete suggestions for improvement, not on judgements.

> *The Graduate Center is here for you if you need external support for difficult conversations. Get in touch at any time.*

4 After the Conversation

The conversation is the beginning, not the end. For the agreement to stay alive, it needs regular attention.

- Schedule the next feedback meeting immediately after the conversation.
- Document open points and send them to each other within one week.
- Use the annual staff appraisal meeting as a structured framework for review and adjustment.

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Checklist: Supervision Agreement

Use this checklist before and after the conversation. It is intended for both sides.

Before the conversation

- ☐ Meeting arranged and at least 90 minutes scheduled
- ☐ Supervision agreement read and open questions noted
- ☐ **Doctoral researchers:** ideas on timeline and topic prepared
- ☐ **Supervisors:** own capacity and expectations reflected on
- ☐ Room booked, phone and other distractions switched off

During the conversation

- ☐ Purpose and structure of the conversation stated at the outset
- ☐ §1 Topic and form of the dissertation discussed and recorded
- ☐ §2 Work plan and timeline with concrete milestones agreed
- ☐ §3 Rights and responsibilities of the doctoral researcher discussed
- ☐ §4 Rights and responsibilities of the supervisor discussed
- ☐ Feedback intervals and format agreed
- ☐ §6 Rules of good research practice confirmed
- ☐ §7 Ombudsperson and doctoral researchers' representative body named as points of contact
- ☐ §8 Family-friendly services of TU Ilmenau addressed
- ☐ Open points documented and responsibilities clarified
- ☐ Next appointment set

After the conversation

- ☐ Agreement signed and a copy received by each party
- ☐ Open points submitted and ticked off
- ☐ Date of the next feedback meeting entered in the calendar
- ☐ Agreement filed where it is accessible for the annual qualification meeting

> *Do you have questions about the supervision agreement or about working together? The Graduate Center is happy to help. Drop by or write to us.*

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* This version was translated with the help of AI.