

# Guidelines for a Supervision Agreement at JGU

Resolution of the GYR Executive Committee May 2, 2023<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This text is an updated and abridged version of “Guidelines for a Supervision Agreement at JGU” drawn up by the GYR executive committee in 2017. At its meeting on April 28, 2017, the JGU Senate recommended that all departments, faculties, schools and academies, conclude a written supervision agreement for doctoral projects and should follow the guidelines in the version issued at that time.

## Purpose of a supervision agreement

The purpose of a supervision agreement is to establish the **structure and mutual objectives of the supervisory relationship between doctoral candidates and supervisors**<sup>2</sup> and, in so doing, to establish a **transparent and reliable basis for collaboration**.<sup>3</sup> This transparency between supervisors and students is also seen as an effective measure for discouraging incidents of research misconduct.

According to section 34 (5) of the Rhineland-Palatinate Higher Education Act, a written **supervision agreement** between doctoral candidate and supervisor is **obligatory** and must be concluded within a reasonable period of time (max. 6 months) after acceptance of the doctoral candidate. As part of its quality assurance concept for the approval of doctoral and postdoctoral regulations concluded on August 4, 2022<sup>4</sup> the JGU has also made a number of the specifications in the supervision agreement obligatory (see Appendix 2 of the quality assurance concept – in German only).

The GYR provides a **template** for a supervision agreement, which is to be **adapted according to the specific field or individual requirements**. These guidelines are intended to provide ideas and orientation to assist doctoral candidates and supervisors in drafting the supervision agreement.

## Preparing for the doctorate: the people involved

The decision to do a doctorate requires a major commitment from a candidate. The consequences of the decision will dominate their daily life or a period of several years. Supervisors too will invest a great deal of their time and energy in working with their doctoral students. It is not a decision to be taken lightly and requires careful consideration and communication of the **mutual expectations and needs** of both parties before a final decision to go ahead is taken.

### Doctoral students:<sup>5</sup>

- The thematic focus of the doctoral project should be the decisive factor in a candidate's decision on **which supervisor** is best suited to their needs: Ask yourself whether the

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<sup>2</sup> According to UniWiND (a network of 81 members (as of 02/2023), including JGU), in these guidelines "supervision of doctoral candidates is interpreted as the mentoring of an otherwise independent and autonomous academic achievement by the doctoral candidate". (UniWiND 2014: 5).

<sup>3</sup> Concerns have sometimes been expressed about the possibility of supervision agreements leading to an increase in litigation. From the point of view of the JGU's legal department, the specific form of a supervision agreement is a matter for the discretion of the individual supervisor and doctoral candidate. A supervision agreement should be concerned with purely practicable matters. The resulting realistic planning and transparency are the features that assure the quality. The fear that an increase in the number of supervision agreements will lead to a spate of lawsuits is not borne out by the experiences of those states with long experience of supervision agreements. In addition, there has been very little change of any significance in the supervision relationship as a result of supervision agreements having become obligatory. The promotion and support of doctoral projects as part of supervision was already defined as part of supervisors' official duties in the previous version of the HochSchG (Hochschulgesetz - Higher Education Act) and could be enforced as part of an official liability claim. The supervision agreement merely makes the rights and duties more transparent.

<sup>4</sup> [https://download.uni-mainz.de/verwaltung-sl/ordnungen/QS-Satzung\\_PromO\\_u\\_HabilO\\_aktuell.pdf](https://download.uni-mainz.de/verwaltung-sl/ordnungen/QS-Satzung_PromO_u_HabilO_aktuell.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> The Graduate School of the Humanities and Social Sciences (GSHS) at JGU provides guidelines for an initial interview for those interested in doing a doctorate in the humanities and social sciences (<https://en.gshs.uni-mainz.de/the-doctoral-supervision-agreement-what-needs-to-be-considered-and-discussed-first-meeting-checklist/>)

supervisor you have in mind is really the best fit for your topic academically, or might another supervisor be better suited? Does this research group have access to the proper facilities/equipment for realization of the project? If the academic focus of the doctorate is a less than an ideal match, are there other important reasons for still deciding to do the doctorate with the chosen supervisor?

- Your personal and career development prospects should be a key factor in your **motivation** for undertaking a doctorate. The decision to go ahead will have a major impact on your life over a number of years: Ask yourself whether you are interested in a career inside or outside academia? To what extent will a doctoral qualification be either a necessary prerequisite, or at least a substantial advantage, for this career? What other qualifications, or further steps, will you need to take to lay the foundations for a successful career – and is doing a doctorate at the same time possible or even sensible?
- Expectations on the optimal **form of collaboration** between doctoral students and supervisors: What do you expect from a mentoring relationship (how regular, how intensive should the mentoring be etc.) and how much do you already know about the expectations of potential supervisors?
- **Personal and social background:** How much time and energy can, or do you want to invest in a doctoral project: (future and family planning, time-management and personal organization, importance of hobbies, holidays, leisure time, money, social status) and is this compatible with the requirements of the doctoral project?
- **Personal Networks:** What sorts of networking opportunities, both private and professional, are available to you?

#### Supervisor:

- **Suitability of the candidate:** Do you think the candidate has the capability to do a doctorate and is the proposed topic manageable in terms of time frame and available resources? Please note: the decision on acceptance of a doctoral candidate is made by the relevant department, faculty, school or academy, not by the supervisor.<sup>6</sup> It is therefore the responsibility of the department, faculty, school or academy to carry out the requisite checks on whether the formal admission requirements for acceptance have been met in accordance with the doctoral regulations.
- **Personal resources and capacities:** Do I have sufficient capacity available to take on the supervision? What funding options are available to the candidate for the doctorate and what kind of support would be expected of me? (e.g. assistance with scholarship/grant applications.) How can I use the jobs I have available most responsibly for the benefit of doctoral students?
- **Motivation of the doctoral candidate:** What are the reasons behind a potential candidate's wish to do a doctorate (inherent research interest, clear interest in an academic or non-academic career, professional goals in research management, lack of orientation)? Am I willing and able to supervise the candidate on the basis of these motivational aspects and on what terms (resources, capacities) can or do I want to do so? What are the candidate's career ambitions (academic vs. non-academic) and can I provide the necessary support?

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<sup>6</sup> A few of the older doctoral regulations at JGU do not yet include provisions on acceptance of doctoral candidates; these regulations are currently being revised.

**Team supervision (second supervisor & mentors):** There are several advantages to team supervision for both supervisors and doctoral students. First of all, it allows a broader perspective on the doctoral topic (where additional specialist supervisors are involved) as well as career planning on a more individual basis (e.g. through mentors external to the academic system). In addition, a team of supervisors makes integration into the research community easier and not only permits more intensive supervision, but also helps to reduce dependence on individuals. This relieves the burden on the primary supervisor not only in terms of time, but also by providing moral support. Team supervision is also seen as an effective means of discouraging research misconduct by providing additional options for advice and stimulating motivation. This also helps reduce the risk of overwork and the build-up of stress, which can overwhelm students and lead them into violations of good research practice. However, for team supervision to work properly, attention must be paid to achieving a clear and transparent assignment of tasks and a division of responsibilities. In addition, the provisions of the respective valid doctoral regulations of the various departments, faculties, schools or academies regarding the number as well as the rights and duties of the supervisors must be observed. Particular attention should be given to ensuring that it is clear which faculty, school or academy the thesis is to be submitted to (i.e. which doctoral regulations apply?). Otherwise, there will be too much potential for conflict. Should any conflict actually arise (e.g. due to contradictory supervision recommendations), the doctoral candidate should not be solely responsible for its resolution.

## Topic of the doctoral project

A **rough idea of the topic**, or a working title, is to be agreed upon by the supervisor and doctoral candidate at the beginning of the doctoral project and as a requirement of acceptance as a doctoral candidate. It can also be helpful to submit a research proposal (exposé).<sup>7</sup> This does not represent a hard and fast commitment; it is much more about encouraging a conscious engagement with and discussion of the objectives of the doctorate between the supervisor and the candidate. **Changes** within the broad thematic framework may be made at any time but should be **documented** in an appendix to the supervision agreement to enable both sides to follow development of the thesis in the long term.

In addition to the thematic focus, the **basic formalities** of the doctorate should also be agreed upon in accordance with the relevant doctoral regulations of the department, faculty, school or academy. In particular, the questions – should they be applicable - of whether the thesis can, or should be, cumulative or monographic, and which language it is to be written in, must be decided upon, or an alternative date for reaching such a decision discussed.

**Formal acceptance of doctoral candidates is carried out by the relevant faculty**, department, school or academy. Accordingly, the currently valid doctoral regulations must be consulted regarding the degree to which the choice of topic is binding and other questions. Any conditions that may need to be met in accordance with the candidate's acceptance into the doctoral degree programme are referred to in the supervision agreement.

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<sup>7</sup> Some doctoral regulations make a research proposal obligatory.

## The supervisory relationship: communication is key

Aside from the formalities of regulations and agreements, **mutual trust and regard, commitment, and regular open and objective discussions are the crucial elements of a successful collaboration.** The exact form that this collaboration is to take should be agreed upon in advance and may include, for example:

- **Regularity:** regular communication between supervisor and doctoral student should take place at least once a semester.
- **Formality:** In order to avoid misunderstandings (which may arise due to language difficulties or different academic systems, for example) and to keep track of what has been agreed on, it is recommended that the key aspects be recorded in concise informal minutes.
- **Content: Example of doctoral projects in humanities and social sciences:**<sup>8</sup>  
A checklist can be found on the website of the Gutenberg Graduate School of the Humanities and Social Sciences: <https://en.gshs.uni-mainz.de/checklist-for-regular-gshs-supervisory-meetings/>.
- **Content: Example of doctoral projects in the natural sciences**<sup>9</sup>
  - When was the last meeting between the doctoral student and the supervisor and when should the next meeting take place?
  - How much progress has been made since the previous meeting? What went well and what not so well?
  - Has progress been in line with the original timetable and the overall objectives?
  - Do any changes have to be made to the project?
  - Which parts of the project are suitable for publication?
  - Which workshops, summer schools, training programmes etc. might be useful for further professional development?
  - Which conferences would be worthwhile attending?
  - What sorts of visits to other laboratories/university research groups or industry, which external fellowships etc. might help boost career prospects in the longer term?

## Time plan and working schedule / striking the right balance

Both the time framework for the doctorate and the supervisory relationship are complex, so it is important that the arrangements should take careful account of **individual circumstances.**

Firstly, the planned **overall duration** of the doctoral project, insofar as this is foreseeable, should be discussed when the agreement is drawn up. In addition to possible legal considerations where employed academic staff are concerned, funding conditions and the specific motivation for undertaking a doctorate (intrinsic research interest vs. career advantages outside academia) should be taken account of. The individual backgrounds of doctoral students are also an important consideration (full-time or part-time doctorate, e.g. due to combining the doctoral programme with a job, bringing up children or caring for relatives). In addition, the requirements of the programme also need to be taken into account (e.g. will it

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<sup>8</sup> Source: Gutenberg Graduate School of the Humanities and Social Sciences.

<sup>9</sup> Based on the status talks of the Graduate School of Excellence "Materials Science in Mainz" (MAINZ).

involve working together with others in a large, networked project, or with partners and necessitate parts of the work being structured and scheduled).

The Johannes Gutenberg University takes the issue of **compatibility between work and family life (work-life balance)** very seriously throughout all stages of the doctoral studies programme and beyond. With this in mind, there are a variety of opportunities and services available to doctoral students and other members of the university. The knowledgeable and friendly staff at the Family Service Office<sup>10</sup> of the JGU are there to answer questions on childcare as well as providing lots of advice on the facilities to be found on our child-friendly campus. The Equality and Diversity Office is another very useful and helpful point of contact.<sup>11</sup>

Secondly, developing a workable time plan with **interim goals** can be very helpful in giving structure to the doctoral project and making it easier for the student to divide up the stages of the working process in such a way that the overall objective is not lost sight of. In the case of cumulative doctorates, it is also important to work out, in compliance with the applicable doctoral degree regulations, what needs to be done and when it needs to be done, i.e. what type of publications will be necessary or useful and when. Thorough and generous planning is important, with leeway built in to allow for any unforeseen developments. Depending on the research field, such a plan may cover anything from a few months up to the entire period of the doctorate.

**At the end of the doctoral project** the time scale available for completion of the individual parts of the thesis must be clarified, the quality assessed, and judgement made on whether the required standard has been achieved, or if more work and time is required. The time needed by the supervisor for correction must also be settled. Attention must be paid here to the applicable doctoral degree regulations. In addition, maximum transparency should be observed when preparing the disputation or viva voce<sup>12</sup>. Details on organizational and procedural aspects along with deadlines are all crucial to a successful completion of the doctorate.

In order to prevent any conflicts arising due to possible deviation from the planned time frame, **earliest possible notification of problems with deadlines or interim objectives is important**. The time plan can be updated during every phase of the doctorate and should be documented in an appendix to the supervision agreement (cf. regulation on changing the supervision agreement).

## Responsibilities of the doctoral student

To avoid unnecessary misunderstandings or disputes arising over unfulfilled expectations on either side, the student and supervisor are advised to decide on clearly defined areas of responsibility. The variety of possible responsibilities will be determined by the individual requirements of the specific doctoral studies programme. The following aspects are relevant for most programmes:

- **Reporting obligations:** When/at what intervals and in what form should the doctoral student report on the progress of their doctorate? This may include presentations in a research colloquium for instance. How detailed is the documentation of progress to be and what form should it take?

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.familienservice.uni-mainz.de/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://gleichstellung.uni-mainz.de/>

<sup>12</sup> To find out the specific regulations for completion of the doctorate, please consult the relevant doctoral regulations. An overview of what the JGU can offer doctoral candidates can be found here: <https://www.young-researchers.uni-mainz.de/doctorate/>.

- **Participation in professional development programmes where applicable:** For example, are set courses planned as part of a structured doctoral programme? What other continuing education courses, events and training opportunities should the doctoral student take part in, and where or to whom should they go if they are looking for further courses or skills (subject-specific seminars, soft skills courses, etc.)?
- **Regular meetings** with the supervisor and the opportunity to take the initiative on arranging meetings.
- **Informing** the supervisor if a decision has been taken not to complete the doctorate or if any fundamental changes are to be made (if such changes are permitted in the research field concerned).
- **Time of completion** of the field work phase / practical phase.

## Duties and responsibilities of the supervisor

In addition to the responsibilities of the doctoral students, the jointly negotiated agreements on the structure of the supervision should also be recorded. Although the agreement on supervision up to the completion of the doctorate is independent of its funding, the financial aspect should not be ignored as fair working and living conditions are essential to the success of the project.

### Individual support

The supervision should provide support and direction on fundamental issues but without changing the character of the thesis as an independent piece of academic research by the student. This includes e.g.

- Support in the **structuring** of the doctoral phase
- **Subject-specific mentoring** on the doctoral project while respecting the academic independence of the candidate, e.g. through
  - Advising on specific topic selection
  - Talking over theoretical and methodological issues such as managing research data, publication, publication strategies and ethical questions
  - Monitoring / progress checks in accordance with the mutually agreed practice
  - Specific feedback on milestones, e.g. on written work (drafts of the introduction, abstracts, papers, posters, etc.) and on funding applications (scholarships, etc.) and, depending on the subject discipline, also on common stylistic aspects
- **Motivating** the doctoral candidate when setbacks occur<sup>13</sup>.
- Advising on the acquisition of **suitable additional skills** (e.g. soft skills, methodological and specialist skills, job-related skills, research communication).
- Advice on **career planning**. It is helpful, along with advice on academic careers and the appropriate strategies (publication strategies, positioning in the academic/research community), to also point out non-academic alternatives (possibly recommending suitable contacts and opportunities). This can be particularly useful if the supervisor assesses the doctoral student's suitability for an academic career, or the career opportunities in the field differently than the student himself/herself.
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<sup>13</sup> The Quality Assurance and Quality Development concept of the JGU stipulates that the supervision agreement must also name a contact point for advice to help students cope with psychological stress factors during the doctorate.

## Targeted support for integration into academic/research activities

The following suggestions for integration into academic/research practice go beyond the remit of the supervisory relationship and are therefore to be seen as **purely optional assistance from the supervisors to their doctoral students**. The supervisor should therefore endeavour to support or, where necessary, initiate measures appropriate to the individual student.

- **Integration into a research group, research association or graduate programme**
- For doctoral students who are not also employed as research assistants: **personal or virtual exchange** (e.g. participation in colloquia, work meetings, conferences)
- Participation in academic **symposia and conferences**
- Participation in **continuing education courses**; both university internal (e.g. in the General Postgraduate Program<sup>14</sup>) and external (e.g. summer schools) are often available.
- **Involvement in teaching**. This both strengthens the feeling of connection with the university and enables the acquirement of additional qualifications. If teaching responsibilities are not regulated by an employment contract or by the provisions of the relevant doctoral regulations, an individual arrangement can be made (e.g. a temporary teaching contract). In such cases, consideration must be given to the type and extent of the teaching commitment to ensure that it is beneficial to students' studies and does not have a detrimental effect on thesis work. Supervisors should use their experience to guide students in terms of time commitment and workload. Students taking on independent teaching duties are advised to attend courses in higher education didactics (for example at the ZQ - Center for Quality Assurance and Development).
- Involvement in drafting **applications for third-party funding**. Here, too, as with teaching duties, it is important that careful consideration be given to the type and extent of work required to ensure that it is advantageous to students' professional development and not detrimental to thesis work.
- Participation in **informal activities** of the department, research group or institute
- Establishing **contact between different doctoral students** or between doctoral students and other researchers.

## Resources and funding

A crucial point that needs to be dealt with before work on the doctoral project can begin is the question of funding. Both parties need to agree a funding plan that, **if possible, will cover the entire period of the doctorate. Unless otherwise agreed, no financial obligations are attached to the supervision agreement.**

Where funding via **existing bodies** (state authorities, existing third-party funded projects, etc.) is either not available, or unsuitable, the supervisor is urged, to assist the doctoral candidate in finding out whether, and if so how, **third-party funding** can be obtained, or whether any **scholarships** might be available to fund the doctorate. A further funding alternative is, of course, **external employment**. In this case, however, it is important that careful consideration be given to ensuring that the work is compatible with the demands of the doctorate; will it fit in with the time plan and the academic work schedule?

In addition to the doctoral candidate's living expenses, other costs that may be incurred in preparing the thesis should also be thought about in advance. These include **material costs** (e.g. for consumables), costs for field research, research visits, symposia, conferences, continuing education, skills development, etc. One of the tasks of the doctoral candidate is to

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.zq.uni-mainz.de/354.php>



find out about relevant sources of funding. On top of this, the supervisor is duty bound, where possible, to suggest alternative relevant funding sources (e.g. foundations, university internal research funding) and to support the doctoral candidate in applying for such funding.

The **resources available** to students during the doctorate should also be made as transparent as possible: can the doctoral student be provided with a workplace (an office of their own, for example, or a permanent workspace in the department, research group or library)? What sort of equipment can be provided (e.g. computer, printer, equipment, consumables, storage facilities for books and other working material)? What are the rules for accessibility with regard to the laboratory, special equipment, library or archives? To what extent can the doctoral candidate access the resources of the department/research group – access to an assistant or to the secretary's/administration offices for example?

## Good research practice / conflict mediation

Any problems or differences (e.g. concerning content and related to the supervisory relationship, to employment law, academic misconduct) should, where possible, be **addressed at an early stage and discussed objectively by those involved**. Care must be taken to ensure that this process is always conducted in a **mutually respectful manner**. The common objective should always be successful completion of the doctorate.

In its quality assurance concept, the JGU stipulates that both doctoral student and supervisor must be committed to the **principles of good research practice**. They declare their acknowledgement of the Regulations for ensuring good research practice and for dealing with research misconduct<sup>15</sup>. Furthermore, they state that doctoral candidates who have been implicated in an incident of academic misconduct through no fault of their own may contact the JGU Ombudsperson in the interests of safeguarding their personal and academic integrity. Further information can be found on website <https://grp.uni-mainz.de/>.

The **ownership and/or copyright of data, results**, etc. obtained in the course of the doctoral project should also be **clarified** as early as possible, for example, if the doctoral thesis is being prepared as part of a larger (edition) project.

JGU's quality assurance concept also stipulates that the supervision agreement must contain a regulation for cases of conflict, specifying **a contact person in the department, faculty, school or academy for non-subject-related conflicts**, e.g. dean, faculty dean or rector<sup>16</sup>.

In addition, for doctoral students who are employed by the JGU, the Quality Assurance Concept (*Qualitätssicherungskonzept*) provides a reference to the work agreement **“Cooperative Behaviour in the Workplace”** (*Partnerschaftliches Verhalten am Arbeitsplatz*)<sup>17</sup>. In cases of conflict in the workplace, the Conflict Advisory Center (*Konfliktberatungstelle*) can provide support<sup>18</sup> (all documents in German).

In the case **legal questions relating to examinations**, the relevant committee in the department, faculty, school or academy is also responsible for conflict mediation in accordance with applicable doctoral regulations.

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<sup>15</sup>Charter of the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz Regarding Good Research Practice and Dealing with Research Misconduct, 13 February 2023 (<https://grp.uni-mainz.de/>).

<sup>16</sup> In cases of non-subject-related conflicts that cannot be resolved cooperatively between doctoral students and supervisors, it is advisable to arrange mediation at a doctoral student services office, or to recruit a person of trust at the department, faculty school or academy.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.personalentwicklung.uni-mainz.de/partnerschaftliches-verhalten/> (in German)

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.konfliktberatung.uni-mainz.de/> (in German)

## Changes to the supervision agreement

In cases where a student's doctoral studies last for several years, changes may occur – in the time and work schedule, for example. It is therefore advisable to check at regular intervals that the supervision agreement is still up to date. Where deviations arise or can be anticipated, it is possible to amend or alter the existing supervision agreement if both parties are happy to do so. All changes must be documented in the form of an appendix to the existing agreement.

A change to the supervisory arrangements is also possible but must be carried out in accordance with the applicable doctoral regulations. The supervision agreement can be cancelled at the request of either the doctoral student or the supervisor in consultation with the faculty council, or council of the relevant school or academy where a successful completion of the doctorate is at risk.

*Stand: 2.11.2023*