Suggestions for Onboarding Doctoral Researchers at TU Berlin

A collection of ideas for doctoral supervisors

TU Berlin Center for Junior Scholars (CJS)

Contents

Preliminary remarks

Dear professors at TU Berlin,

Thank you for your interest in the topic of the induction of doctoral researchers! This collection of ideas for onboarding[1] doctoral researchers was developed in the **Resonanzraum**, a **committee of the Center for Junior Scholars Council** that has been addressing the issue of supervision and measures for improving doctoral conditions since July 2023. At the beginning of the discussion, it became clear that new doctoral researchers find familiarizing themselves with work at their chair or in their project often so complex and time-consuming that their doctoral studies take a back seat. As a result, the decision was taken to compile a **set of measures** that summarizes ideas and existing templates to make this **initial phase** easier.

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[1] Onboarding means the induction of new employees to the place where they will work and be deployed.

The goal of onboarding is to better integrate **new doctoral researchers** in the structure and culture of their research groups, institutes, and faculties from the outset and to ensure that **doctoral researchers approach their doctoral studies in a goal-oriented manner from the very beginning**. The measures are aimed at **all doctoral researchers – research associates, scholarship holders, and external doctoral researchers** – with a focus on measures for doctoral research associates at TU Berlin.

This brochure on the onboarding of doctoral researchers deals with measures that can be initiated by supervisors and the heads of chairs. It is part of a three-part series. In addition to this brochure, another **brochure** is being produced for onboarding measures that doctoral researchers themselves can take or initiate. The brochures bring together ideas and measures that are intended as **suggestions**; supervisors, doctoral researchers, research groups, and faculties can **select, modify, and combine measures that are appropriate and necessary for them**.

We would like to express our sincere thanks to the members of the Resonanzraum who contributed their ideas and experience to this brochure. We would also like to thank the **academic chairs of Professors Göhlich, Bardenhagen, Stark, and Rethmeier as well as the Faculty Service Center of Faculty VI** for allowing us to publish their best practice examples here.

Your team from the Center for Junior Scholars
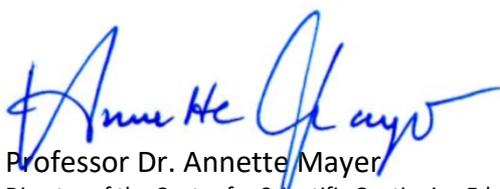
Professor Dr. Annette Mayer
Director of the Center for Scientific Continuing Education and Cooperation (ZEWK) and the Center for Junior Scholars (CJS)

Dr. Andrea Adams
Center for Junior Scholars – proMotion Program head

Settling in and getting to know the team

Many academic chairs already have established routines for training new research associates. It makes sense to offer such **inductions also for doctoral researchers who are pursuing their doctorates with a scholarship or an external position**. It has proven beneficial for new doctoral researchers to be **welcomed by the head of the academic chair and by the office**, to be given a **tour** of the academic chair and institute as well as any related and cooperating academic chairs, and to be introduced to the staff. A profile with a **photo and a short self-introduction** of the doctoral researchers can facilitate their integration if it is distributed to all colleagues (e.g., by email or in print).

To promote interaction between new and existing employees, it is helpful for everyone to get to know each other. The Center for Scientific Continuing Education and Cooperation (ZEWK) does this by having one new and one long-standing team member **introduce themselves** to each other. The Pecha Kucha presentation format is used, in which a short sequence of approx. 10-20 slides with only images and no text are shown, presenting the person's professional career and private life. Furthermore, new doctoral researchers can be better integrated into the team by making them responsible for **organizing regular community activities**, e.g., the Christmas party or the staff outing.

Start the doctoral project in good time and clarify expectations regarding supervision

Early career researchers demonstrate by their doctoral degree that they are capable of making an **independent scientific contribution to research**. Even though doctoral researchers are expected to conduct their own research and work independently, they need **guidance and supervision in their research projects in order to successfully complete their doctorate**. It is advisable to discuss the **approach to the topic and the writing of the exposé** with the doctoral researcher at the outset, and to set a deadline by which the doctoral researcher should have completed both. To this end, regular meetings between doctoral researchers and their supervisors should be set up from the start. The **frequency and responsibilities** should be clearly established at an early stage. If the supervisor is also a superior, care should be taken to arrange meetings that **focus primarily on the progress of the doctoral thesis** and not just on work for the academic chair or research project. Supervisors should support and encourage doctoral researchers from the outset to work toward completing their doctorate in a targeted manner. It is also recommended that supervisors **set meeting dates** rather than letting doctoral researchers choose them themselves. This ensures continuous support and clear time-frames that can significantly promote progress on a doctorate. In preparation, a **doctoral report** prepared by the doctoral researcher can be used to provide a quick overview of the status of the doctoral project, e.g., in the form of the template drawn up by Professor Bardenhagen of the Chair of Aircraft Design and Aerostructures. To follow up, we recommend that the doctoral researcher writes a **summary of the results** of the meeting.

[Doctoral report template Chair of Aircraft Design and Aerostructures (Professor Bardenhagen)](#)

Another document that needs to be discussed and finalized at an early stage is the **supervision agreement**. Conclusion of a supervision agreement is mandatory under the TU Berlin **Doctoral Regulations** and under the **Berlin State Higher Education Act**. The supervision agreement, however, not only serves to meet administrative requirements but also offers the opportunity to clarify both parties' expectations. An early discussion of the supervision agreement should be taken as an **opportunity** to clarify **both parties' expectations regarding supervision,** to set regular **meeting dates and milestones** in the doctoral process, and to generally increase the **commitment** to cooperation. For the conclusion of a supervision agreement at TU Berlin, the first step required is that the doctoral topic and regular meetings be agreed upon. Further agreements are to be added later.

Further, it is advisable to **declare your intention to pursue a doctoral degree** as early as possible. Doing so offers doctoral researchers greater security and commitment, as they are only officially considered doctoral researchers at TU Berlin once they have submitted a declaration of intent. Supervisors also benefit from this greater clarity. From an institutional point of view, an early declaration of intent from as many doctoral researchers as possible enables more reliable monitoring of researchers withdrawing and the duration of doctoral studies: information that is also of interest to supervisors.

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In addition to the supervision agreement, the detailed questionnaire in the "Expectation management worksheet" from Tartu University or the "Guidelines for Good Supervision of Doctoral Researchers" from the Bielefeld Graduate School in History and Sociology can be discussed as a way of **clarifying both parties' expectations** regarding supervision and the doctoral researcher.

An example of how doctoral researchers can be informed about the expectations that the head of the academic chair has of them is provided by the **research guidelines of Professor Rainer Stark** from the Chair of Industrial Information Technology at TU Berlin, containing an overview of **agreements, requirements, and procedures for research work**. It includes a generalized ideal doctoral process, the "**doctoral barometer**," which aims to support doctoral researchers in their project and time management and to clarify work arrangements and expectations.
It is also advisable to discuss the **relationship between doctoral work and the other professional tasks at a chair or in a research project** at an early stage and to formulate your own expectations so as to avoid misunderstandings and increase planning security for all concerned.

According to the Berlin State Higher Education Act, doctoral researchers in qualification positions are entitled to **50%** of their **working time for achieving their own academic qualification**, while doctoral researchers in third-party-funded positions are generally entitled to **25%**.
For doctoral researchers in positions, teaching obligations, project work, or administrative tasks often compete with their own qualification efforts in terms of time demands.
Tasks ensuing from the position (e.g., in a budgetary or third-party-funded position) that are not directly related to the doctorate should also be clearly discussed in terms of time demand, when the position is taken up. An example of this is provided by the "doctoral guidelines" for the Chair of Joining Technology by Professor Michael Rethmeier.

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Seeking support for the supervision

Discussion of the practice and requirements of doctoral supervision among professors helps to ensure high-quality supervision. This can take place either within the faculty or institute or across universities through the services offered by the ZEWK and the Berlin Leadership Academy.

Improving networking and peer support

In order to **improve networking internally** and to promote mutual support among doctoral researchers, the heads of academic chairs can encourage and promote various activities. It is important to keep an eye on all doctoral researchers: research associates, scholarship holders where applicable, and other external, non-staff doctoral researchers.

A **joint team lunch** is a proven opportunity for networking. In addition, the heads of academic chairs can set up a **mentoring system** or a **buddy system** for experienced and new employees, for example. **Mentors** assist new doctoral researchers with specialist knowledge and help them integrate into the scientific community. **Buddies** can help with leisure activities – particularly valuable for newcomers to Berlin.

The heads of academic chairs, for their part, can promote the **formation of groups in the workplace.** In this case, it is important to consider whether it is more helpful for doctoral researchers to place **people with similarities** in the same office, e.g., doctoral researchers from a particular country who can help each other cope with the culture shock. Or whether, on the contrary, it makes more sense to encourage cooperation and networking throughout the team by means of **mixed-background office sharing**.

If there are no colloquiums or work meetings in which doctoral researchers and postdocs give each other feedback at the academic chair or institute, the heads of academic chairs can encourage doctoral researchers to form **groups to discuss** how their doctorates are progressing. Small research groups can join forces so as to reach a workable size.

The CJS offers support in **setting up** interdisciplinary **peer coaching groups**. These offer structured interaction in small groups of 3 to 5 doctoral researchers who support each other in non-technical aspects of their doctoral studies.

Induction event for peer coaching groups by the CJS

Making important information and resources accessible

The heads of academic chairs should inform new doctoral researchers about **procedures** at an early stage – this facilitates integration. For this purpose, Faculty VI and the academic chair headed by Professor Göhlich have already developed checklists which can be adapted for other TU chairs. It should not be forgotten here that the heads of academic chairs should ensure that new doctoral researchers are added to the relevant **mailing lists** at the chair, institute, or faculty by the chair or faculty staff responsible.

Onboarding checklist of Faculty VI

Onboarding checklist for the Chair of Product Development Methods and Mechatronics (Prof. Göhlich) – in German

To enable quick orientation in the workplace, it is helpful to create **transparency about the available resources**. In general, it helps to make **information available about the funding and resources available** to doctoral researchers in the academic chair, e.g., for conference trips, equipment, and device utilization. Research associates working on a **third-party-funded project** should be informed of the **research proposals underlying the project** so that they are aware of the research goals and the resources applied for.

The CJS offers an overview of funding opportunities for conference trips and research stays: CJS – Guide to International Mobility

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Doctoral researchers with scholarships or external positions who are pursuing their doctoral studies at certain academic chairs at TU Berlin are **often less well integrated into everyday university life.** The heads of academic chairs who want to better integrate these doctoral researchers into the research group can consider what **resources** they would like to make available to them, e.g., listing them on the website, TU business cards with the institutional address, opportunities to use vacant offices, or printing/copying facilities. Inclusion in research projects or teaching assignments likewise enables greater professional involvement and promotes interaction within the chair.

International doctoral researchers at the academic chair often have **special needs in respect of information**. In addition to the store of knowledge and experience at the academic chair concerning visa issues, accommodation, and legal matters, the head of an academic chair can refer international doctoral researchers to the CJS **Welcome Brochure for International Doctoral Researchers**. The CJS has also published a **brochure with a collection of relevant information for academic chairs**.

Teaching

Teaching is a central task of academic staff in budgetary positions. Information on the organization of teaching that is specific to a faculty or academic chair should be made available and actively communicated: An overview of courses offered centrally can be found on the **Teaching Portal** on the intranet and the central pages of the TU Berlin website.

Continuing education offered in the field of teaching, especially for newcomers

TU digit Wiki digital teaching

Continuing education

TU Berlin offers a comprehensive continuing education program via the Center for Scientific Continuing Education and Cooperation (ZEWK) and the Berlin University Alliance. Institutes or academic chairs can compile a **list of recommendations** for subject-specific and non-related courses of continuing education. The ZEWK can help to provide an overview of the continuing education offered (and develop additions as needed). Supervisors and doctoral researchers can **work together to consider which continuing education courses may be useful**. The heads of academic chairs should point out that **continuing education is a requirement for teaching and/or research associates** and therefore may be done during **working hours**. This is particularly relevant for doctoral researchers, as it allows them to integrate their professional and methodological development into their daily work better.

If there are specific continuing education needs, the head of the academic chair can contact the ZEWK. For teams in particular, further training is offered as part of [Train the Tutor plus](#) and [team coaching](#). The ZEWK also provides support in **organizing external continuing education courses outside the field of study**. The same applies to courses in the area of good scientific practice, training which is essential for research but often not a mandatory part of a degree program. In addition to the ZEWK's self-study program on good scientific practice, the professors of a faculty can consult on what is needed in this area and develop new programs together with the ZEWK. Heads of academic chairs are welcome to contact the director of the ZEWK, Professor Dr. Annette Mayer, directly about their needs relating to continuing education.

[Continuing education courses](#) offered by the Center for Scientific Continuing Education and Cooperation (ZEWK)

[TU Berlin/Staff Council agreement on continuing education for staff of TU Berlin](#)

Contact
[Center for Scientific Continuing Education and Cooperation](#)

Director of the ZEWK, Professor [Dr. Annette Mayer](#)

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Setting the course for a successful doctoral phase

We hope that the ideas in this brochure have provided you with inspiration for onboarding at your institution. We would be delighted if we could contribute to making the onboarding process at TU Berlin even better. If you have any suggestions for this brochure or would like to share a best practice example from your own field of work, please do not hesitate to contact us. Please send your feedback to Dr. Andrea Adams: a.adams@tu-berlin.de.

Induction and welcoming events for new doctoral researchers

TU Berlin, the faculties, the Center for Junior Scholars, and the Berlin University Alliance offer **induction and welcoming events** throughout the year. When supervisors and the heads of academic chairs publicize these events, doctoral researchers realize that the events are important and that they can be attended in their working hours.

- Welcome Day for new staff at the TU
- Introductory events organized by the CJS with the faculties
- BUA Kick Off your Doctorate Retreat

CJS initial consultation and information event for new doctoral researchers

Further information, advice and contact

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