

# Career development tips and good practices for PhD candidates & Postdocs

## About this document

<b>URL working draft</b>	<a href="https://tinyurl.com/yaja6tev">https://tinyurl.com/yaja6tev</a> (for comments and suggestions)
<b>Document type</b>	Faculty guideline
<b>Last modified</b>	12-6-2023
<b>Author(s)</b>	Guus Schreiber, October 2017, PhD task force, April 2021
<b>Distribution</b>	Faculty of Science
<b>Consolidated PDF versions</b>	
<i>Version</i>	<i>Description</i>
yyyy-mm-dd (add link)	<text>

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## Tips and best practices

Many PhD candidates and Postdocs pursue a career in Academia. Due to limited possibilities not many of them can actually realise this kind of career. Therefore it is wise to orientate on which career paths are available, inside and outside Academia.

The purpose of this document is to make it much easier to find and access help on career matters for PhD candidates, Postdocs and their supervisors. This document lists a number of tips, best practices and courses / training which are available at the VU.

*This is a living document; comments and text suggestions are always welcome in the Google Doc version of this document. This document is updated by the PhD Task Force 2021 of the VU Faculty of Science. For an overview of the work of the Task Force: see the [PhD Roadmap](#).*

### Use the annual consultation to your own advantage

Use your annual consultation as an opportunity to reflect on where you stand and what you should do to take the next step in your career. Solicit explicit support from your supervisor, when particular actions are needed. If you think you need more support from your supervisor, consider arranging for another staff member to join your annual consultation (see also the tip ‘get a mentor’).

According to the collective labour agreement all employees will be granted at least two development days for working on his or her long-term employability. For PhD-candidates, development is part of the training and supervision plan (TSP) and includes 30 ECTS of (personal) training. The annual consultation gives you the opportunity to talk about your training needs. Other topics that can be discussed during this annual talk are:

- Cooperation with your team and your supervisor
  - Career and personal development
  - Workload
  - Social well-being and a safe social setting
  - Working conditions
- annual consultation: [The Good Talk](#)
  - [Training courses Annual consultation for employees](#)

## Get a mentor

Many senior staff members are happy to give you career advice. A fresh pair of eyes can be very helpful, e.g. to help you set your academic priorities. It is often a good idea to ask someone who is not directly involved in your daily work. You can ask someone yourself; alternatively, the VU has periodical mentor programs. This person could also be present at the annual consultation. Meeting frequency is typically 2-3 times per year.

- [Mentoring programme for talented scientists](#)
- [Peer coaching for PhD candidates and postdocs](#)

## Make sure you are visible

In the long term it pays off to do "community service", both within the department (e.g., sitting in a committee, maintaining a website) and outside (e.g., involvement in workshop/conference organisation/ maintaining your own personal website with your work). If you don't get such invitations, ask your supervisor or your mentor for help, e.g. by dropping your name in relevant circles. Networking is a skill you can learn.

## Choose your niche

It is important to build up a research profile in the community in which you are active. Don't try to cover too many topics. Try to identify an area for which you think you have the skills to become excellent. Ask your supervisor and mentor for feedback on a proposed niche. Have your elevator pitch ready and offer to give presentations on your niche.

## Work on your weaknesses and use your strengths

First of all: be aware of and optimise the use of your unique talents, this could be specific expertise on a certain topic or (general) skills.

All of us also have weaknesses; nothing wrong about that. Think of a strategy to work on them. For example, if you consider yourself a poor presenter, then each time you present, ask in advance a trusted colleague to give you honest feedback afterwards.

- [Career orientation for PhD candidates and post-docs](#)
- [Surviving academia for post-docs](#)
- [Tackling workload and stress](#)
- [Another perfect project](#)
- [How to fund your idea](#)
- [Time management](#)
- [Conflict Management and Negotiation Skills course for post-docs](#)
- [Oh yes, it's stress](#)
- [E-learning](#)
- [Overview of all PhD courses](#)

The VU Grants Office offers support & workshops on proposal writing:

- [Proposal Writing Support](#)

More courses are available and can be found via [Academic Language Programme - academic writing](#)

## Postdocs and PhD students should consider getting a teaching qualification

Teaching is an essential academic skill and supervisors should actively encourage postdocs to teach. When you apply for a tenure-track position it is often helpful to have a teaching qualification ("BKO" at the VU). As a postdoc it is usually a good idea to give one course per annum. You can then ask the department to fund a parallel BKO training (English-spoken BKO training exists). The teaching skills can also be useful in a career outside academia.

- [University Teaching Programme](#) (BKO)
- [Didactic Skills - VU Centre for Teaching & Learning](#)

## Think broader than academia

Many PhD candidates and postdocs have chosen careers outside academia. Consider if this is an option for you. There are a lot of organisations outside academia who value the professional skills you have gained during your postdoc/PhD period, such as your research skills, written & oral communication skills (writing papers / teaching / presenting), project-based working, etc. You might consider doing an internship to test the waters. If you're considering industrial jobs, make sure your networking activities are (also) aimed at that.

- [Career Services Faculty of Science](#)
- [Career guidance & coaching](#)

*Career advice* will help you to find answers to questions such as: Who am I, what are my competencies, what do I want, what is the next logical step in my career, and what do I need to take this step?

*Coaching* helps you to improve certain aspects in your daily work, for instance personal efficacy, time management, conducting difficult conversations or other skills you would like to improve. Coaching provides you with new insights and promotes more efficient behaviour.

## Wellbeing

Your wellbeing is very important to us, so if you are experiencing problems at work or if you have (personal) issues that could influence your work, then there are several people you can contact to discuss these matters. You can contact your supervisor, HR advisor or company doctor. Besides that, the VU has various professionals you can consult (confidentially). In the [Helpmatrix](#) on VU-net you can find an overview of whom to address with your problems. You can find more information on the same topic on the following page [Help, Support and Advice](#). There is also a specific page voor PhD candidates: [Help, Support and Advice for PhD candidates](#). Below the contact details of a few of these professionals within the VU.

## **HR advisor**

The HR advisor is available for all the problems that you can experience at work and also with other problems that have an influence on your work. The HR advisor can also redirect you to other professionals within the VU.

[Overview HR advisors](#)

## **Company doctor**

If you are long-term ill you can visit the company doctor. The company doctor advises you and your supervisor how much / what type of work(load) you can handle during illness. Besides that, the company doctor can redirect you to a specialist for possible treatment.

secretariaat.amd@vu.nl / 020 59 89008

## **Social worker**

For advice and short-term counselling of employees who are at risk to get sick due to psychosocial problems (work/life balance; problems in collaboration (with colleagues or management); stress, workload, heavy mental pressure; personal problems (financial, family, relationship, etc).

On referral by your HR advisor / Company doctor / supervisor

## **Confidential counsellor for employees**

We are striving to be inclusive and there should be room for everyone, no matter who you are. Nonetheless, there are situations where employees experience undesirable conduct like discrimination, (sexual) harassment, stalking, aggression, violence, intimidation etc. The confidential counsellor is independent and can assist the employee in dealing with the problems.

We have confidential counsellors within our Faculty and at VU level. You can choose whom you want to talk with. For more information and overview of confidential counsellors: See [this page](#).

## **PhD Psychologist**

PhD candidates experiencing mental health issues (related to work and/or working conditions) can visit the PhD Psychologist for short-term counselling. PhD candidates may call on the psychologist irrespective of their funding (i.e., whether they are employed at the VU, or on a personal grant or other form of stipend), as long as they are registered as a VU PhD candidate.

To make an appointment, please contact [secretariaat.amd@vu.nl](mailto:secretariaat.amd@vu.nl) or 020-59 89008 (between 9:00 and 12:00 on work days)

## **The social safety hotline**

Do you have serious concerns about your own safety or about the safety of someone else you know at VU Amsterdam? Report your concerns to the [social safety](#) hotline.