Supporting students achieve milestones requires three important steps:
- Scaffolding the planning of their PhD.
- Supporting them assess their progress and providing feedback.
- Supporting them to take action and address challenges that they face in their work.

In doing so, take account of your disciplinary tradition for a monograph-based vs. paper-based (or other alternative format) PhD, and for primary vs. secondary data PhDs. Please check out our milestones planner resource and pick one that fits or, in conversation with the student, amend one which comes close to your disciplinary needs for the particular project of each PhD student.

## Scaffolding the planning of the PhD

Helping students plan their PhD is a key part of effective supervision for several reasons:
- **Developing a realistic plan:** Encouraging students to map out their project early—and review it regularly—helps them create a practical, achievable plan
- **Mental health benefits:** PhD research can feel open-ended and overwhelming. A clear plan with interim goals helps students track progress and maintain motivation.
- **Integrating ESRC internships:** ESRC-funded students must include a "Research in Practice" internship. Planning should consider the best timing for this within the project.
- **Meeting funding deadlines:** ESRC expects SGSS-funded students to complete their PhD within 3.5 years, making it essential to plan a deliverable project within that timeframe.
- **Understanding specific support that students may require:** Some PhD students will require specific support e.g. caring responsibilities outside of their studies, a disability, being neurodivergent.  The planning process should enable you as a supervisor to understand the specific support they require and plan this into the PhD process from the start.

**How to support students plan their PhD**
Long-term research projects are challenging to plan because they evolve over time. A structured approach that works well includes:
- **Creating an overview plan**: This provides a high-level project roadmap to guide the student's progress. We have provided in this resource several examples, based upon different PhD structures, to use as a starting point.
- **Focus on short-term goals**: Encourage students to plan in three month blocks using the MoSCoW method:
  - **MUST** – Essential tasks for the next 3 months.
  - **SHOULD** – Important but not critical tasks.
  - **COULD** – Nice to have if time allows.
  - **WON'T** – Tasks to postpone or exclude; setting boundaries helps with workload.

**Supervision practices to help students plan**
- **Break work into smaller chunks**: Get students to define 3–4 manageable tasks for each month. Smaller goals are easier to tackle and allow for regular review and feedback.

- **Plan backwards from key milestones**: For example, working back from data collection to account for ethics approval and method development. Make sure timings are realistic and include contingency time.
- **Encourage the students to think through risks**: Issues such as participant recruitment, changes in policy, and obtaining appropriate approvals can easily derail a PhD. Spend some time discussing key risks and encourage contingency planning.
- **Encourage parallel activities**: Suggest working on a small number of activities in parallel, so progress continues if one area stalls.
- **Support students become realistic in their planning**: encourage students to record how long tasks take them to and to use this data in planning future tasks – and, where appropriate, modify the research design to take these timescales into account.
- **Plan in other commitments**: Check with students that they have planned in time for other commitments that they have, e.g. attending training, teaching work.
- **Include time off**: Ensure students factor breaks and leave into their plan to maintain balance and avoid burnout.
- **Help students help you**: Let the students know when would be good to receive documents for your feedback. This can help you return feedback quickly which also helps with student motivation and research experience.
- **Plan the "Research in Practice" internship** – Early in the PhD process, work with the student to start planning the internship, ensuring its timing is factored into the plan.

## Supporting students assess their progress

A plan provides a framework against which students can assess their progress.  To support this there are a number of approaches you can take:
- Think about how you can leverage MS Teams (or similar platforms) for supervision. For example, you may want to use a shared Planner Board, or use a specific channel, which can be accessed by all of the supervision team, to answer supervision questions between meetings.
- Schedule in regular supervision meetings (at least monthly).  Most supervisors find it helpful to have more meetings early in the PhD process and to use a more directive style of supervision until the student develops their skills as an independent researcher.
- Where students are working remotely, they may benefit from frequent shorter meetings to maintain communication and a sense of belonging to the university.
- Make sure there is an agenda in place to make sure key issues are covered in each supervision meeting. As their planning skills develop the student should take responsibility for production of this.
- Remember that some students may be very self-critical so when they have achieved what was set out on their plans, highlight this to them.
- Support the student reflect on their approach to their research.  Ask them what they can learn from the last month's activity and what they should stop, start and keep doing.
- Balance out task focused supervision, for example about research design, with supervision focussed on a review of overall progress towards the PhD.  We would recommend having this broader supervision conversation at least quarterly.
- When students are not progressing as you would expect, address this as early as possible and provide clear feedback. This resource at the University of Edinburgh highlights how to

have these conversations.  Remember: whilst it might be "nice" not to, this is not a viable long-term strategy and does not help the student in the long-term.

## Supporting students take action

- If a student is struggling to progress, you will need to support them take action to address the issues.
- Check whether there is anything outside the PhD that's the barrier for them not progressing. Asking a specific question such as "What else is going on in your life which is impacting on your PhD studies" provides an invitation for students to share issues.
- You may want to take a coaching style approach to helping them solve challenges through asking them questions about how they could address the issues they face – see this resource. Whilst this does not yield results as quickly as being directive, it supports the students build confidence and learning.
- Focus on helping the student identify short term goals which they can realistically achieve within a few weeks, as this will help them build confidence and regain motivation.
- When students are struggling you need to ensure that supervisors remain accessible, and it is worth scheduling in short check-in meetings.
- Be aware of, and direct the student towards, support from SGSS and your institution – methods courses, writing support, mental health and wellbeing services and policies (e.g. the SGSS Taking Space policy)