

A PhD is stepping stone to a career as a researcher — not necessarily an academic researcher. Within the social sciences in the UK, about 40% of PhD graduates are working outside of the tertiary education sector three years after graduation (source [ESRC](#)). These individuals work in a variety of roles including within professional roles in the public and third sector. [Findings from focus groups](#) with our social science PhD students in Scotland show there is an expectation for supervisors to engage with students' career development. This resource suggests some ways to do so.

1. Start early and revisit regularly

- Begin career conversations early in the PhD. We would suggest having this as a specific discussion within the first three months of the PhD, but recognise that plans change so revisit this conversation every year. Our [PhD Milestones](#) resources can help.
- Encourage students to engage with the careers service at your institution across the course of the PhD. Many universities have dedicated career advisors to support PhD students.

2. Align PhD activities and requirements with career aspirations

Encourage students to design elements of their PhD to support their future career aspirations. Consider a range of activities that can support career development including: training; presenting at conferences; developing teaching experience; different forms of research dissemination; working on collaborative projects; and participation in student and PhD community activities, can support career development.

For students who are undertaking a [Research in Practice internship \(mandatory for SGSS researchers\)](#) this can be tailored to align with the student's longer-term career aspiration, or if they are not sure of their longer-term plans, to help them explore different options. If students complete a Research in Practice internship, it presents a valuable opportunity to reflect on their career direction.

- Choose an academic vs. practice vs. policy related internship, to suit career aspirations
- Have a dedicated career-focused meeting after the internship to discuss:
 - What they learned about the working environment and organisational culture and how this has informed their career thinking.
 - Which skills they used and developed during the internship.
 - How the experience shaped or refined their career interests.
 - The networks which they built during the internship and how they might sustain these networks.
- Encourage students to think about how they can build on this experience in the next stages of their PhD in order to help you understand how best to support them:
 - What new skills or experiences would help them move toward their goals?
 - Whether it influenced their desire to work in academia or another sector
- This reflection helps students make more informed decisions about their next steps.

3. Normalise career discussions beyond academia

Students often feel hesitant to discuss non-academic career options, fearing that it may be seen as a failure. You can help reduce this anxiety by:

- Making it clear that exploring career options beyond academia is valid and valued.
- Sharing examples from your network e.g. career paths of former PhD students/colleagues.
- Helping them to reflect on their strengths, achievements, and career values, and how these might translate into different sectors or roles

Students' career goals will likely evolve over time. [ESRC research](#) shows that career aspirations often shift during the PhD, particularly among those initially considering academic careers.

Make it comfortable for students to change their minds by referencing this fact and asking:

“How have your thoughts about your post-PhD career developed since we last spoke?”

4. Be Realistic about the academic job market

Be honest about the challenges and competitiveness of securing permanent academic positions, especially given current funding constraints.

- Discuss the need for contingency plans and explore parallel career options outside academia.
- Encourage students to consider postdoctoral roles and other research-related positions as potential stepping stones rather than permanent solutions.
- Be aware of how your experience of academia (both positive and negative) may influence how you discuss roles inside academia with the students that you supervise.

5. Addressing career anxiety and mental health

Career uncertainty can be a major source of anxiety for PhD students. It's important to normalise this and reassure students that it's OK not to have a clear plan early on.

- Acknowledge that career uncertainty is normal, so changing career goals is also normal.
- If a student seems particularly anxious about their career prospects, you could suggest they seek additional support through the university's mental health or wellbeing services. You might also consider the benefits of [cohort approaches to supervision](#) to alleviate career-related anxiety.

6. Focus on career characteristics, not job titles

Rather than focusing on specific job titles, help students reflect on the type of work they'd like to do and support students focus on building a career around their strengths and interests. Ask questions such as:

- What key tasks would you like to be doing?
- What aspects of your research do you enjoy the most?
- What roles/organisations align with your research expertise and interests?
- What type of organisation would you like to work in (e.g., academic, for-profit, non-profit, public sector)?
- What impact would you like your work to have (e.g., societal, community, commercial)?
- What is important to you outside of work which needs to be factored into your plans?

7. Supporting international and underrepresented Students

Different students face different challenges based on factors such as race, gender, disability, and nationality.

- International students may face visa restrictions or employment limitations. Encourage them to research their visa options to clarify these.
- Underrepresented students may encounter additional barriers in the job market. Encourage them to seek out professional networks and mentors who can offer targeted support.

8. Developing and evidencing skills

Supporting students in identifying and articulating their skills is crucial for career development.

- Help students recognise transferable skills: critical thinking, data analysis, project management, communication and problem-solving are valuable in many sectors.
- Encourage reflection and development of evidence statements using the STAR model (link to resources) from both within their studies and from extra-curricular activities.
- For students who are considering an academic career using a [narrative](#) CV format is a useful approach.

9. Enable students to network effectively to support their career development

Open up your own professional network to students where possible:

- Ask students if there's anyone in your network they'd like to connect with.
- Encourage students to connect with individuals from a broad range of roles within the social sciences to find out more about different types of jobs or sectors.
- Facilitate introductions where appropriate, especially to former PhD students working in relevant sectors.
- Help students to prioritise the types of events and conferences they would like to attend, to give them exposure to different types of networks.

SGSSS students tend to value supervisory support with career development over and above most other type of support –our [supervisor recognition testimonials](#) suggest.