



## Milestone Meetings: A Guide for Students in Biological Sciences

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### Introduction

All PhD students in the School of Biological Sciences will complete four milestones throughout their candidature. These are designed to assess whether you have made sufficient progress in your research and are developing the professional qualities that make you likely to be on track to complete with a PhD from Monash University. They are also meant to identify potential issues or problems, and to propose solutions to these, as early as possible. These milestones are not intended to replace regular meetings with your supervisory team, but to provide an independent check on your work to date.

**These milestones are subject to [Graduate Research Progress Management Policy](#) and [Graduate Research Progress Management Procedures](#)**

PhD candidates in Biological Sciences will complete the following Milestones:

Milestone	Due date	Organiser
3-6-Month Review	3-6 months from start date	HDR Education Officer - Nicole DeRycke
Confirmation	12 months from start date	candidate
Mid-Candidature	24 months from start date	candidate
Final Review	36 months from start date	candidate

All PhD candidates are enrolled on a probationary basis until their Confirmation Milestone.

To successfully complete your milestone, you should demonstrate that you:

- Can outline and defend the project's theoretical and conceptual framework;
- Have formulated a sound and rigorous research project which is supported by the appropriate methods;
- Have planned a realistic timetable for submitting the thesis by the current submission date, providing a detailed statement of progress to date;
- Have diligently and effectively applied yourself and are making satisfactory progress in your research project;



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- Can write at a level required for the degree;
- Can deliver a clear and effective oral presentation;
- Completed the Faculty Induction, Research Integrity activity and Project Management (any Project Management Activity with a minimum of 2.5 hours listed in the suite of [Monash Doctoral Program](#) Professional Development Activities.)

### Your Supervisory Team

Your supervisory team is responsible for helping you plan your project and for monitoring your progress. This team consists of your main supervisor and at least one co-supervisor or associate supervisor that is independent of the main supervisor (for more information, please see <https://www.monash.edu/graduate-research/supervisors-and-examiners/supervisors/code-of-practice>). Co/associate supervisors are there to provide a second point of reference for your project, additional expertise, and extra support should you need it.

It is very important that you maintain clear lines of communication with your supervisors, so that they can help you trouble shoot problems with your project and to redirect progress should it be necessary. Ideally, you will meet with at least your main supervisor every 1-2 weeks. If there are issues you do not feel comfortable discussing with your main supervisor, your co/associate supervisor is there to help. This is particularly important, as it avoids any unpleasant surprises for the student or supervisors at milestone meetings.

### Your Thesis Panel

Your thesis panel is made up of a panel chair and two independent panel members that will assess your progress. The School has dedicated panel chairs, and you will be assigned one of these academics to lead the Milestone meetings. The reason that we have designated panel chairs is to encourage consistency across thesis panels. You and your supervisors will also submit a list of potential panel members, from which two will be selected. To be able to independently evaluate your work, panel members:

- Cannot be part of your supervisory team (previous degrees are acceptable)
- Cannot have a perceived Conflict of Interest with the candidate or supervisor (e.g. that may interfere with giving honest feedback). Please see [https://www.monash.edu/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0009/792297/Conflict-of-Interest.pdf](https://www.monash.edu/data/assets/pdf_file/0009/792297/Conflict-of-Interest.pdf) for more information.

The panel's purpose is to assist with the successful management of your candidature. Because the panel members are separate from the supervisory team, they can independently assess how you are progressing and offer guidance where necessary. The panel can be approached at any time during your degree if you wish to seek additional support beyond the supervisory team.

You, your panel members, and your supervisors will come together at each of the four milestones during your candidature. A good way to prepare for these meetings



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is to look at the questions the panel will have to answer with respect to student progress in the report forms. They will give you a gauge for what the panel is looking for.

### Milestone Meetings

The first milestone meeting will be organised for you by one of our HDR Education Officers (Nicole DeRycke). You will organise all subsequent milestones. It's best to organise a date, time, and room for these meetings well in advance (at least 2-3 months before the due date), as it can be exceedingly difficult to coordinate the schedules of all panel members and your supervisors; failure to organise a meeting in time is not grounds for a milestone extension; contact the HDR Education Officers (Nicole DeRycke and Fiona Hibbert) if you have trouble organising your milestone meeting. Be sure to schedule these meetings for 2 hours, to allow plenty of time for discussion with your panel.

#### What to prepare for milestone meetings:

For all milestones, you will need to provide a written report two weeks before the milestone meeting. You and your supervisor should discuss how to prepare the milestone report and presentation, and your supervisor should have commented on at least one draft of your report. This means that you will need to get started on your report early, allowing at least two weeks for your supervisor to return feedback, and at least one additional week to revise the report.

Oral presentations of 20-30 minutes are required from the Confirmation milestones onwards. These presentations are public, and attendees are encouraged to ask questions. While many students elect to give an oral presentation at the 6-month review, it is not formally required.

In addition, before the milestone meeting, you and your supervisor should fill out the milestone report form. For the 6-month review, this is a paper form. The format of the research plan is described on the paper form.

#### Overall structure of the milestone reports from Confirmation to the Final Review:

Two weeks before the Milestone meeting, you are required submit to the panel a written progress report of **3000-5000** words.

The [Moodle site](#) gives a short description to what is required for each milestone, the following is a detailed description:

##### General Overview:

1. A thesis title
2. A review of the relevant research and theory pertaining to your work;
3. The aims of your thesis (can but do not need to correspond 1:1 with chapters)



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Next, you should prepare a brief outline for each chapter. This should include:

4. The rationale for the work
5. Proposed experiments/approaches
6. Any relevant data already collected, including manuscripts and publications
7. Statement of % complete (where relevant)
8. Target journals for publication of the manuscript (where relevant)

You will want to provide evidence that you have thought about the feasibility of your project and program. This should be done as a timeline:

9. At the end of the document, provide a timeline for the planned research activities. This timeline should be detailed for the current year, and more general for subsequent years (where appropriate). Please include here also your PhD start date.

Finally indicate how you are progressing with coursework.

10. Completed coursework should be included by attaching the MyDevelopment summary.

It's expected that the quality of your milestone reports will improve between milestone meetings, as you develop a deeper understanding of your field. For later milestones, experimental results need not be presented in great detail, as drafts of manuscripts should be submitted together with the report.

### **What happens during the milestone meetings:**

From the Confirmation milestone onwards, the milestone meeting will begin with your oral presentation onwards. You may be introduced by either your supervisor or the Panel Chair. This is the public portion of the meeting, where anyone can attend. Please keep your presentation within 20-30 minutes, so that you have enough time for discussion with your panel.

After your presentation, either your supervisor or the Chair will open the floor for questions from the public. This typically will take around 5 minutes. The Chair will then conclude the public portion of the milestone meeting, and begin the panel meeting. Only the candidate, their supervisors, and the panel members will remain. The panel meeting will be run by the Chair, and together with the panel members will provide detailed feedback on both your presentation and written report. You will be asked about your research and, in general, the panel will expect you to answer, but will certainly encourage contributions from your supervisors. The panel will also check on your progress with regards to the required coursework. There will be opportunities in the meeting for both you and your supervisors to speak to with the panel alone. At the end of the meeting the panel chair will provide an oral summary of the meeting followed soon after by completion of the milestone report form. If you have lost any time on your project (i.e. bad weather during field seasons, sickness, lab moves, equipment failure, etc.), this should be documented at the relevant milestone.



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### Milestone-specific information:

#### 6-month milestone:

This milestone is specific to the Faculty of Science. It can be held anywhere from 3-6 months into the degree. The initial project review meetings will be scheduled by Nicole DeRycke, using availability in google calendar, and you will be sent a calendar invite and asked to accept it. If you are unavailable, you will need to discuss this with Nicole.

You will need to prepare a report including a literature review, thesis outline, proposed timeline that details the research plan for the thesis. You are not required to give an oral presentation for this milestone although your supervisor may suggest it.

The panel will be interested in determining whether you have a sense for how your research questions fit into the broader field and how your proposed work will address those questions. They will also weigh in on more practical matters – is the planned work achievable? Are there any potential pitfalls that could be avoided by additional training or supervision? Do you have the resources you need, and are contingency plans in place? They will be interested in whether you need writing support, if you are demonstrating the work ethic required for successful completion PhD, and whether you and your supervisor have a pattern of effective and regular communication. The panel may pass you with no additional recommendations or they may suggest additional activities be carried out prior to Confirmation.

Examples of recommendations:

- Rewrite part of the report with a greater emphasis on the theoretical framework in the field or a more thorough plan for data analysis, experimental design, etc.
- Attend writing workshops,
- Identify a 3<sup>rd</sup> supervisor or collaborator to provide support around a particular technique or equipment,
- Suggest more regular meetings with your supervisors or produce written summaries of your meetings, etc.

Keep in mind, all of these recommendations are made to help you finish your PhD in a timely manner.

#### Confirmation:

This milestone is held 12 months into candidature. It marks the beginning of the milestone meetings that require both a public oral presentation (20-30 minutes), as well as a written report.

The written report should be structured as above, but the panel will be looking specifically for:

- a more complete literature review,
- a refined summary of each of the thesis aims,
- an indication of thesis structure (or papers to be published),
- and some indication of progress (% completion per aim is useful).



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Here, as above, the panel will be checking on student work ethic, writing ability, capacity to understand the conceptual and theoretical framework of the research, and student/supervisor communication. More so than above, the panel will be seeking to ascertain your intellectual capacity to carry out a PhD.

As above the panel may pass you without any recommendations or make some suggestions for improvement. In very rare cases, if you do not possess the interest, motivation, or intellectual rigor required, other options may be considered. These may include leaving the PhD program or transferring to a research Masters.

In all cases, if you do not pass the milestone you are given a 3-month period to rectify issues raised by the panel. After this period, you and your supervisor will reconvene with the panel to assess whether you have demonstrated sufficient progress to continue in the PhD program.

### **Mid candidature review:**

This milestone is held 24 months into candidature. For this milestone, you will need to provide a written report summarising your progress and a complete or near complete draft of a manuscript/thesis chapter. You will also be required to give a talk (20-30 minutes). You and your supervisors will be queried about whether the remaining planned research is achievable in a year's time. If not, alternate plans for thesis chapters may be discussed. Also, the panel will ask you about your plans to attend a conference to present your work to the experts in your field.

### **Final review:**

This last milestone meeting is to be held 36 months into candidature. It represents a final check on your progress and a discussion of your readiness to submit in the coming months. In this case, your milestone report typically includes a brief introduction and a list of chapters, their aims, and their degree of completion. You should also submit any draft manuscripts, chapters, or published articles resulting from your thesis work. This helps the panel evaluate whether you will be able to submit your PhD within 3-3.5 years.

The panel may ask whether potential thesis examiners have been considered, the student's plans for obtaining their next position, plans for applying for and utilising a Postgraduate Publication Award (PPA), and publication strategies more broadly, etc.

## **The Higher Degree by Research (HDR) Committee**

The HDR committee is available to help with any questions you have with regards to your progress. Although this is very rare, sometimes students come into conflict with their supervisors or panel members. Under these rare circumstances, the Director of the HDR committee (or another committee member depending on the situation) is available to provide support, advice, and to mediate discussions.

## **Extensions for Milestones**

All milestones must be completed by their due date. However, if there are extenuating circumstances that prevent you from meeting this deadline (for example due to illness or timing of field research) it is possible to extend your milestone deadline. You should discuss a milestone extension with your supervisor and the



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HDR team (education officers and/or HDR committee chair or members) well in advance of the milestone deadline, where possible, to ensure that you are not at risk of termination of enrolment. For detailed enrolment conditions, please refer to the student handbook: <https://www.monash.edu/graduate-research/faqs-and-resources/content>.

You can access the milestone extension forms here:

<https://gradresearchforms.apps.monash.edu/>