

Tips for Research Success

Also check out our “How to Stay Sane While Writing a Thesis”

and “Myths and Facts about HDR” tip sheets.

- **Research how to do research.** You may have conducted some research in your undergrad. If not, talk to current research students and supervisors to find out what works and what doesn't. Read books, blogs, and the Moodle unit for HDR students on how to do research. The answers will vary depending on your discipline(s) of study.
- **Research possible research topics.** The paths that lead students to conducting research on a given topic can be quite varied. Some students choose a topic, others are given one, some stumble on an idea, some join a research team/stream, and some go with the flow. Where possible, pose questions that interest and challenge you. Explore the concepts of a broad topic, as you will in your preliminary literature review and when preparing your research proposal for confirmation of candidature into your Masters or PhD. Have the broad brush strokes of a topic that inspires you, fits in with your values, suits your personality, and is practical for you (eg does the research require travel, lots of lab work, experiments on a time cycle, working with humans or animals?). Read theses in your areas of interest.
- **Research a supervisor.** Check out research profiles of supervisors as part of the last tip. Ask other students what someone is like as a supervisor—word-of-mouth is useful. Ensure potential supervisors are interested in your topics and/or you in theirs. Check if your expectations about what a supervisor and supervisee “should” do match theirs. The “should” expectations might not always be realistic, but get a sense of whether you and a potential supervisor are at least on the same page. Is the supervisor someone who likes to give you space and autonomy or someone who engages in “snoopervision” and gives you no room to breathe? Do you want an “extreme” supervisor or someone who is in the middle of these extremes? Are you on the extreme end and do you need to change your expectations?
- **Rights and responsibilities.** While researching a supervisor, you might discover some supervisors believe it is your responsibility to find a topic, initiate meetings, find the resources you need, keep to a timeline, etc. You, on the other hand, might believe these things are their responsibility. In practice, the rights and responsibilities of all parties do tend to be somewhere in the middle, and need to be revisited and renegotiated as you go along. That said, you will need to love your thesis more than your supervisor does. At the end of the day, you should have more of a vested interest in getting it done than your supervisor does, as he or she is juggling a number of projects, students, etc.
- **Make a Supervision Agreement.** Sometimes when students are “shopping around” for a supervisor, both student and supervisor are putting their best foot forward. But each might discover that neither is who they thought they were as things progress. Having a supervision agreement at the beginning of your candidature — which is a bit like a pre-nuptial agreement—is a good idea as it encourages clear communication. Neither of you can just “smile and wave” but have to agree about when and how to meet, who does what, what progress has to be made and by when, who owns what ideas, etc. It is not a box-ticking exercise, but a chance to be transparent about how the supervision arrangement will work. The agreement should be revisited at key times, to ensure student and supervisor are doing their best to meet the terms of the agreement. Click the link to UNE information about [supervision agreements for HDR students](#).
- **Make it practical.** Discuss the nuts and bolts of what supervision meetings will look like. How often will you meet? Fortnightly is not unreasonable. Will meetings be by phone, email, skype, in-person? Have an agenda of regular items for discussion. Email the agenda to your supervisor prior to the next meeting. Email a summary of points discussed soon after any meeting, including action items (jobs that you and/or your supervisor are meant to do) —a bit like keeping minutes—that way you have a record of ideas and progress, can check that things have been followed-up, and ensure there is a common understanding about the direction that your research is going in.

The support you need to succeed

- **Say what you need.** Don't expect your supervisor to be a mind-reader and to know what you need. Tell him or her what you require. Be assertive. This means stating what you require in a calm and respectful tone, while also showing or seeking an understanding of what the supervisor may need. This does not guarantee you will get what you need or want, but is a step in the right direction to problem-solving what works for both of you. If you say nothing, resentment can build and things can get worse.
- **Keep supervisors in the loop.** It is likely you will have more than one supervisor because your main or primary supervisor might be away some of the time, might get sick, or does not have certain expertise needed for your project. Your secondary supervisor can "step up to the plate" when needed, but your supervision agreement needs to spell out when and how often this is to happen. Include all your supervisors in emails so that everyone is "on the same page" and not giving mixed messages. If your supervisors disagree about something or clash, let both know of the mixed, confusing, or clashing information and seek for them to clarify the situation.
- **Research what students typically need.** There's that word "research" again. Students often "don't know what they don't know". It can at first seem tricky to know what you need when starting out, and to know what is "reasonable" to ask for from a supervisor or School/Faculty. Your HDR Coordinator in your School can guide you about what you may need and can expect. They are a point of contact, separate to your supervisor, for guidance and support.
- **Ask about practical things.** If you haven't been told, ask your HDR Coordinator and/or supervisor about School permission and funds for things like: conference attendance; statistics support; data-collection services and/or software; transcription services; technical support; approved thesis editors; formatting services; licensed software; training in use of programs; laboratory equipment; other experimental resources; a study space, etc. Schools will have guidelines about what is deemed reasonable and permissible.
- **Ask what you can give yourself.** Ask yourself as well as those close to you what you can each give to help you progress with your research. Can you afford to cover any costs the School doesn't have funds for? Can you buy yourself some time during busy periods—ie pay for a baby-sitter, gardener, cleaner, someone to do data-entry? Can you have flexibility with paid employment to allow for peak research times?
- **Perform regular self-checks.** There will be times when you are "on a roll" or just "in the flow" and know you are working well. But there will also be times when you are busy but are not really doing what you need to be doing. Rather than have a whole day go by and then find yourself saying "I didn't do any of my research today", get into the habit of checking your study behavior several times a day; be aware of how you are spending your time and whether you are in essence procrastinating or meeting essential priorities. Procrastination is where we put off what needs doing now. We will often appease the guilt that comes with procrastination by doing something else that makes us feel useful or virtuous—weeding the garden, scrubbing the bathroom tiles, checking emails, doing a shop, etc. Sound familiar?
- **Spot the procrastination traps.** We can sometimes convince ourselves that we are not procrastinating by doing study-related tasks like: reading yet another journal article; perfecting that introductory sentence; or collecting even more data. The trick is to ask yourself if you really need the extra data or article, whether you have made sense of the resources you already have, and whether the final proof of your introductory sentence can wait until you get more ideas on the page. Many research students fall into the "perfectionist" trap because they are scared of finishing, scared of showing their supervisor or others their ideas, or believe they "are not good enough", and then overcompensate via the over-reading, over-proofing, over.....

- **Ask why you are procrastinating.** We do everything for a reason, including procrastinating. Perhaps you are procrastinating because you have lost direction with your research, need something clarified, are feeling anxious or bored or tired (again, ask why), are having self-doubt, etc. If you know why you are procrastinating, you can then problem-solve your way out of it. For example, if you are anxious because you don't understand something, ask your supervisor for guidance. If you are bored because you can't see where your research is taking you, look at what you have done so far. See the progression of your ideas and how they link in to what others may have already done in the area.

- **Aim for realistic, compassionate self-talk.** Often we are not logical or rational creatures. Many people who procrastinate know when and why they procrastinate but still do it. This can be because of underlying sabotaging beliefs about one's identity in general or as a student. "I'm not smart enough", "I'm lazy", "I must not make mistakes", "People will see I'm a fraud", "I haven't done enough", "My ideas are silly". It is normal for all students to have a crisis of confidence at some point in their research journey, but if such thoughts persist and stop you doing what you need to do, try stepping back from these thoughts and simply noticing they sometimes come and go. At times you can also remind yourself of things you do or know about yourself that challenge some of those thoughts. For example, the good work you did in your undergrad studies that got you to where you are now.

- **Aim for sustainability.** The upside of being a research student is that you often have more autonomy and flexibility as to when you do your research—allowing for constraints like access to laboratories, equipment, research participants, etc. You may be able to have flexibility to study in the morning or late at night (to fit in with if you are an early bird or night owl, or to fit in with family and work commitments). The downside is that you may think you have to be "on" all the time and then don't give yourself a break, or that you can be "uber-flexible" and do things later on while filling your day with time-wasters. Aim for a flexible yet sustainable routine that allows for a paced number of study hours per day. If you are studying full-time, consider study as a 9 to 5 job, with flexibility in your week to repay any study time you borrow from 9 to 5 due to the unexpected (a cold, visitors, computer crash, head-ache). Factor into your week time for exercise, meals, paid work, family, friends, cleaning, etc.

- **Less is more. And have more of less.** Sometimes our form of procrastination is to overwork things. We can convince ourselves, for example, that if we are to write something, it has to be an entire chapter, or 8 hours of solid writing or nothing, or that we have to create the perfectly phrased paragraph. We can overdo things or set goals that are too big. Sometimes we have to step back from what we are doing, check we at least have the essential ideas, framework or scaffolding from which we can expand or create building blocks. Aim to set yourself smaller goals and writing tasks. Aim for a couple of "power-hours" of writing each day. Write small amounts often or regularly. Look at what you are writing as if you are an alien from another planet. Does it make sense? Have you covered the basics and does one building block fit into the others?

- **Put your ideas out there.** You might be attracted to doing research because you think it means you can work on your ideas without having to interact with other human beings. This might be true some of the time, but the reality is you can't afford to be shy about what you are doing in research. It is important to put your ideas out there—whether it be in a supervision meeting, to peers, at seminars, at conferences, in drafts of your work, and in publications. Academia is the business of scrutinising each other's work, being open to feedback, having ideas challenged, building on ideas, making mistakes, and going through many iterations, versions or drafts of your work. Get into the habit of regularly writing your ideas and having someone see them—even in their incomplete stages. Look for opportunities to not only write about but to speak about your work. Perhaps give a "3-minute thesis presentation" in your School.

- **Overcome writer's block.** Many students at some point experience some writer's block—possibly due to the above (being shy, overwhelmed, too self-critical, etc). Whatever the reason, doing a study warm up can help. This might mean quickly looking at the last thing you wrote, or reading some summary points from your reading—this helps you get into the mindset for identifying what you actually want to write. Doing a brainstorm can also help. This means writing down everything and anything that springs to mind about your work, without any censorship. Just let the ideas flow, no matter how silly or incomplete they might seem. This is writing with your creative hat on. There is plenty of time to put your critical hat on to later polish your writing. Some students find it helpful to just write without thinking about the referencing or editing until later. When you later read what you have written, then you can cite the references. That said, some students find it helpful to cite as they write—to know they have covered relevant content in the literature. It is really whatever works for you.

- **Don't aim for the last word.** Many research students fall into the trap of thinking their research thesis will or must be the definitive, last word written on their topic. This thinking invites taking on a topic that then gets too big—the scope of which cannot be met within a Masters or PhD program. We encourage you to see your research as the beginning of or part of an existing conversation about a topic, and that it is OK for the conversation to not end—that others will want to respond to the new ideas that you have brought to the conversation. You may have follow-up ideas for your research that you pursue in a post-doc, a publication, or further qualification. You don't have to do it all and you don't have to do it in the one research thesis.

- **Identify your strengths.** It has often been said that what gets a research student over the line is sheer determination, persistence or tenacity. Yes, you have the smarts to do your research, but it is the preparedness to work hard, to expect the unexpected, to try and try again that are also vital. That said, the capacity to change “tack” or direction, to be flexible and adaptable, is also important —ie to know when continuing on the same path is leading to diminishing returns. There will be days where you spend 80% of your time working on something that is only contributing 20% to your research, and other days where you spend 20% of your time achieving 80% percent of your research outcome. This is part of the normal “rollercoaster” of research. But if you find yourself often putting lots of energy into minimal gains, do seek guidance from your supervisor about whether a different approach is needed.

- **Maintain your strengths and know your limits.** Some students (and supervisors) are under the mistaken belief that undertaking a research course is like a marathon that requires blood, sweat and tears. This might be the case for some of the time (!), but is definitely not mandatory in order to complete your research. Higher degree study is not meant to be about suffering or like “wearing a hair shirt” - i.e. itchy and horrible. It is ideally fun, exciting, challenging and can be undertaken at a healthy pace. You can keep the pace healthy by planning, list making, prioritizing, keeping a schedule of what to do and when, allowing for “just-in-case” time or some “wiggle room” in any schedule, plus some time for spontaneity, the unexpected, family, friends, sport, shopping, cleaning, cooking, annual holidays, some paid work, etc. If you borrow study time, know you can pay it back in your schedule. You need time to stay strong and healthy. This may mean saying no to people or, rather, not saying “yes” to everything. If you do say “yes”, know you have the right to change your mind—as there are limits to how far you can stretch yourself.

- **Put it all together.** Research topic & supervisor. Express needs, Self-Check, Experiment with regular writing, Ask for help, keep things Realistic, Communicate openly, stay Healthy.

If you require any additional assistance, consider making an appointment with UNE Student Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS) by calling (02) 6773 2897.