



University of
South Australia

HOW TO SUCCEED AS A RESEARCH DEGREE STUDENT



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How to succeed as a research degree student

To succeed as a research degree student means to complete your thesis in the required time and have it favourably received by your examiners. It is important too that your research is respected by your peers – for example, through seminar and conference presentations.

How do you achieve this success? Research shows that to be a highly successful research degree student, you need to:

- maintain good working relations with your supervisors
- write regularly
- manage your time effectively
- have a realistic attitude and stay motivated
- get help when necessary.

These characteristics are discussed in this booklet, with some additional information showing how they are catered for at the University of South Australia.

Take a look at the Research Edge online newsletter to see what the University's research degree students are up to. New issues are released monthly, and are a great way to find out about current workshops and opportunities.

▷ unisa.edu.au/researchedge

Maintain good working relations with your supervisors

Choose the right supervisors – people with research profiles in your field who are able to mentor you and work professionally with you as you become an increasingly independent expert in your field.

- If your thesis is interdisciplinary you may need additional supervisors to cover all fields.
- Meet and discuss problems regularly.
- Set goals together.
- Communicate regularly by email.
- Talk openly about supervision concerns.
- If your supervision is not working, deal with it sooner rather than later. Discuss it with:
 - your supervisors
 - your school or institute's research education: portfolio leader (or equivalent)
 - your division's dean of research.
- Keep a written record of all discussions.

While relationships between students and academic advisers are more flexible and collegial these days, they remain hierarchical. Your supervisor is still your primary academic guide and mentor during your candidature and your relationship is of critical importance. (Mare Krone in Denholm & Evans 2006, p. 24)

Write regularly

- Set deadlines for written work and tell your supervisors what they are.
- Synthesise information and write something about your research often.
- Write about what you are reading. Make notes using the Research Notes field in EndNote, or the Personal Notes field in RefWorks.
- Write regularly, even when you think your writing is not good enough. Write your ideas – what you think.
- Use the MS Word thesis template provided by the University (or adapted other template) from day one.
- Keep a research journal, log book or lab book and record every detail.
- Get help if you are stuck. Talk to your supervisors, peers or a lecturer in research education.
- Seriously consider publishing your research as you go. Theses containing published research are almost the norm in some disciplines.

Writing is a way of validating the underlying premise of the research work – that is, that you have a thesis or hypothesis and that your approach and argument, or your experimental design will test these ideas and provide new insight. Even if you are not sure that you have anything new to say, it is still worth writing. Your supervisor understands that it takes time for the new ideas to emerge and appreciates any writing at all rather than nothing. (Robyn Owens in Denholm & Evans 2006, p. 176)

Manage your time effectively

- Treat your research degree as a job.
 - Set regular hours and stick to them.
 - Set deadlines and stick to them (project manage yourself).
 - Have a proper workplace at home, in addition to the workplace provided at the University.
 - Take breaks and holidays.
- Avoid distractions.
 - Make your research degree a major priority in your life.
 - Set goals and realise you have to let some other things go.
 - Avoid over-commitment to distracting activities.
 - Don't let anything interfere with your study timetable.
- Limit paid employment.
 - If you are a full-time research degree student, your primary role is to work on your thesis and complete on time. It is therefore recommended that full-time students undertake a maximum of 8 hours of paid employment per week.
 - If you must work longer hours, switch to part-time study.

Another strategy during thesis preparation where my main task was writing full-time was to treat it like a job. I would be at the computer [or laboratory] by 08:30, with a break for coffee at 10:00, with lunch at 12:30, another break at 15:00 and finish at 17:00. These breaks reflect my normal office routine, which gave me a sense of being back at the office. (Louise Reynolds in Vilkinas 2005, p. 8)

Have a realistic attitude and stay motivated

- Remember, it's a research degree not a Nobel Prize (although it could lead to a Nobel Prize). Your research degree is one small step, not the answer to the meaning of life. You will contribute to new knowledge, but not necessarily change the world.
- Research something you are passionate about – you have to maintain your interest for at least 2-3 years.
- It is better to research a question than a topic. In the beginning this will be broad, but as you proceed it will be refined.
- Avoid becoming strangled by perfectionism. Do the best you can using your strengths, and identify your limitations.
- Have an 'I can do it' attitude – failure is not an option. A research degree takes persistence.
- Have a plan with built-in milestones (targets), including your Research Proposal, ethics approval, literature review, conferences and Reviews of Progress.
 - Stick to your plan.
 - Develop supports.
 - Reward yourself after attaining goals and milestones in your research.
- Keep at it.

Remember, your research degree provides you with an opportunity to engage with a research project of your choice for an extended period. In the future such opportunities may be limited by the demands of employers or research organisations.

Make the most of this opportunity!

One way to stay motivated is sustained tracking of progress.

Tracking your progress means that you can push yourself into action to meet a deadline, or plan a reward or a well-earned break, when you know that you have reached a significant milestone in the doctoral journey. (Jacqueline Rowarth & Pam Green in Denholm & Evans 2006, pp.115–6)

Get help when necessary

A research degree is a supervised training program.

- Accept that it's OK to get help – sooner rather than later.
- Ask your supervisors.
- Talk to your school or institute's research education: portfolio leader (or equivalent).
- Talk to a lecturer in research education (Learning and Teaching Unit).
- Talk to other students.
- Join a peer support group or online community.
- Attend on-campus RESA (Research Education Support Activities) workshops.
- Work through RESA online support materials.
- Network with other researchers in your field.
- Attend conferences.

Resources

Your supervisors are your best resource. However, during your degree you will also benefit from the following resources.

Websites

- **myUniSA student portal**
▷ unisa.edu.au/myunisa
(Also accessible via the 'For students' link on unisa.edu.au)
The myUniSA student portal is the best starting point to access links to key student resources, including the ones listed below.
- **Research degree students**
▷ unisa.edu.au/researchstudents
Visit this site for degree milestones, administrative processes, key policies, contacts and more.
- **Research Education Support Activities (RESA)**
▷ unisa.edu.au/researchstudents/workshops
(Also accessible via the 'Workshops & resources' link on the research degree students website)
Visit this page for on-campus and online workshops and resources relevant to all stages of your research degree.
- **Resources for Research Degree Graduate Qualities**
▷ unisa.edu.au/researchstudents/rdgq
Visit this page for support in completing your Reviews of Progress and developing the qualities you will need in your future career.
- **Research education**
▷ unisa.edu.au/researcheducation
Visit this site for resources from lecturers in research education – the 'Information for students' section will be especially relevant.

Resources

Books

As a research degree student you will find the following Australian books useful. The Library has multiple copies of each.

- Denholm, C & Evans, T (eds) 2006, Doctorates downunder: keys to successful doctoral study in Australia and New Zealand, ACER Press, Camberwell, Victoria.
- Gardiner, Maria & Kearns, Hugh 2010, Turbocharge your writing: how to become a prolific academic writer, Thinkwell, Adelaide, South Australia.
- Kearns, Hugh & Gardiner, Maria 2006, Defeating self-sabotage: getting your PhD finished, Staff Development and Training Unit, Flinders University, Adelaide, South Australia.
- Kearns, Hugh & Gardiner, Maria 2006, The 7 secrets of highly successful PhD students, Staff Development and Training Unit, Flinders University, Adelaide, South Australia.
- Swales, J & Feak, C 2000, English in today's research world: a writing guide, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, Michigan.
- Swales, J & Feak, C 2004, Academic writing for graduate students: essential tasks and skills, 2nd edn, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, Michigan.
- Vilkinas, T (ed) 2005, The thesis journey: tales of personal triumph, Pearson Education, Frenchs Forest, NSW.
- Wallwork, A 2011, English for writing research papers, Springer, London.

Top 10 tips

- 1 Take responsibility for your own research. You will be more independent than honours or coursework students. Take the initiative to drive your research.
- 2 Make the most of opportunities to travel, attend conferences and speak about your research. Learn from experienced researchers and your peers. Listen to professionals in your field.
- 3 Practise your writing. Take a writing course. Ask for feedback. Start early, get in the habit.
- 4 Publish along the way, aiming for at least 2-4 publications during a PhD and 1-2 publications for a masters.
- 5 Work abroad/collaborate. Get a world view of your field. Collaborations may lead to post doctoral openings and can help to build your reputation abroad.
- 6 Write grant proposals for travel and additional funding. Present all requests for funding professionally, even the smallest grant.
- 7 Get involved in committees, seminar series, discussion groups and forums. Be active not passive. Talk to your supervisor often.
- 8 Take courses designed for research trainees. Our Research Education Support Activities (RESA) and ATN e-Grad School provide opportunities to develop key skills and knowledge. Start early and build skills over the course of your research.
- 9 Work hard. If your research is your passion, this will be easy. Look at other researchers and fellow students who are successful – they all work hard.
- 10 Plan and organise. You will need good time management skills. Set your own deadlines and keep them. Keep a plan for the next 3, 6, 12 months. Keep a daily journal or laboratory book, and record milestones.



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For further information contact

Research student enquiries

Email: research.students@unisa.edu.au

Website: unisa.edu.au/researchstudents

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