GAINING THE EDGE: KICKSTART YOUR RESEARCH

9.00am–12.00pm, Friday 9th March 2007

Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
Venue: Guild Seminar Rm 2, 1st Floor Guild Village

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http://www.studentservices.uwa.edu.au/learning
http://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au
WORKSHOP OUTLINE


9.40 – 10.00: Contextualising your research project

10.00 – 10.30: The importance of acquiring transferable generic skills

10.30 – 10.50: Building academic relationships within and outside the university

10.50 – 11.05: Tea break

11.05 – 11.40: Preparation of a draft timetable for your thesis project

11.40 – 12.10: Peers, colleagues, supervisors

12.10 – 12.30: Sources of training and evaluation
WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES

• To highlight the complexities of managing a research degree

• To develop an understanding of the research process for PhD and Masters Candidates.

• To provide an introduction to the information, skills and strategies to enable you to maximise your potential as a graduate student.

• To gain some knowledge of generic institutional expectations and academic conventions early in your candidature.

• To increase graduate students’ awareness of programs and services offered by the university.

Self assessment exercise one.
What does research at this level entail? How is it different from what you have done previously?

List your reasons for undertaking a research degree.

What benefits/satisfaction will your research degree bring you?
The rationale for getting you to complete the first exercise is to explore your current attitude toward your PhD or Masters by Research project. Do you see it as being solely a narrowly defined, specialist academic investigation of your chosen topic? Do you feel that the process of carrying out your research will allow you to build a skills base that will prove critical in your academic and professional life? Successful graduate research involves equal parts of both; rigorous scholarly knowledge of your chosen subject, but also a commitment to acquiring transferable generic skills. Your project over the next few years will allow you to identify and hone these generic skills, indeed you will need to employ them to successfully manage your course, finish your course within the prescribed time frame, and be in a better position to exploit opportunities upon completion of your postgraduate degree. So it is really a question of making effective choices at the beginning of your candidature, rather than towards the end.

Case studies
University of Western Australia’s Graduate Attributes

Research students at UWA are expected to acquire certain attributes during their candidature. These attributes, or generic skills, have been distilled into the statements listed below. It is planned that graduate research students would assess themselves and be assessed during their candidature in terms of their development of these generic skills.

I. DOING - Undertaking research “The cutting edge Ability and capacity at an advanced level to:

i. Think creatively, logically and critically

ii. Investigate, analyse and synthesise ideas

iii. Design, manage and complete projects

iv. Question accepted wisdom by identifying assumptions, assessing their implications, testing them, and deciding on their appropriateness

v. Develop original ideas and concepts

vi. Recognise excellence and how it is achieved

vii. Recognise limitations at the personal, practical and conceptual level

viii. Work collaboratively

ix. Work independently

x. Solve problems, make decisions and work effectively under pressure

xi. Manage time effectively

xii. Identify and disseminate the impact and benefit of research within the scholarly discipline and the broader community

xiii. Communicate verbally, graphically and textually with specialist and general audiences

xiv. Publish research findings in high quality journals/books or appropriate formats

xv. Comply with regulatory and statutory requirements (e.g., Ethics, Health and Safety, IP and Commercialisation)

xvi. Prepare an application for research funding

II. BEING - Professional attributes “The leading edge” Ability and capacity at an advanced level to be:
i. Knowledgeable, informed and thorough
ii. Positive, receptive and resilient
iii. Self-motivated and able to motivate others
iv. Considerate, helpful and respectful
v. Adaptable and innovative
vi. Sensitive to ethical, social, and cultural issues
vii. Aware of big picture and day to day issues
viii. Proactive in career development

This list was compiled from information at:
http://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/home/supervisors/generic_skills

As you can see, there is no disjuncture between the skills that are critical in postgraduate research and those desired by employers: the ability to cope with change, analytical proficiency, self-motivation, curiosity, self-discipline, effective planning skills etc.

**Exercise:** How will you go about acquiring these skills during the term of your candidature? (Break in to small groups)
RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE UNIVERSITY

As a graduate student you will, over the following years, enter into a number of relationships that are much broader than that which you have with your thesis *per se* and your supervisor. These relationships are the fora within which you will be able to cultivate the kinds of skills and attributes that are described above. The student who situates themselves within the wider ‘research community’ is more likely to develop these attributes and skills, more likely to be instilled with confidence, enthusiasm and optimism, and more likely to reduce common feelings of isolation so prevalent amongst graduate research students.

**Discussion:** Suggest what sort of academic relationships (interpersonal, institutional, and organizational) you will enter into through the course of your candidature.
THE GRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOOL

As you might already know, the Graduate Research School is the University’s administering body for the affairs of graduate research students. The School deals exclusively with all matters relating to the admission, enrolment, supervision and examination of PhD and Masters by Research candidates. It is the Graduate Research School that sets and enforces the guidelines for submission of a research proposal. So, you have a relationship with the Graduate Research School which is rather intense at the beginning and end of your thesis writing project.

Open to discussion: Can we then begin to formulate a research schedule; perhaps we can call it the Protocols of Candidature and Thesis Examination. Keep in mind the requirements set down by the Graduate Research School, for it is your obligation to follow these and submit all the requirements when they are due.
In chronological order the requirements of the GRS include

- Nomination of supervisors must be approved by the Board of the Graduate research School.

- Submission of a research proposal (within six months for fulltime/nine months part-time PhD candidates): Guidelines for which can be found at: [http://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/forms?f=28471](http://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/forms?f=28471)

- Submission of fieldwork plan and authorisation from your head of school (as per guidelines at: [http://www.safety.uwa.edu.au/policies/field_work](http://www.safety.uwa.edu.au/policies/field_work))

- Submission of a Annual Progress Reports

- Submission of names of four potential examiners for approval by the Graduate Research School prior to submission of the thesis. It is the Graduate Research School that classifies your thesis (they are guided by the examiners’ recommendations).

In fact the requirements of the Graduate Research School provide the time framework which you will work to when constructing a schedule for the timely completion of your dissertation. Incorporate the tasks and deadlines set by the Graduate Research School into your overall timetable. I cannot over emphasise the fact that the thesis represents a **time management task**. Set deadlines and plan how you will work towards those deadlines.

What I am leading into with this discussion is the notion that planning is vitally important. A good research plan will:

- Clarify aims and objectives

- Define activities required

- Define whether the order in which these activities are undertaken is important, and if so, determine an appropriate sequence

- Identify critical points in the research at which progress can be reviewed and the research plan reassessed

- Estimate times at which these critical points will be reached so that progress can be accurately evaluated (this should be at least every three months)

- Ensure that effective use is made of key resources, including the researcher’s time

- Identify priorities once the research is underway
• Increase the likelihood of successful and timely completion of the project.

Research can be unpredictable and has an element of creativity so plans must be flexible. This may require frequent re-evaluation and modification of your plan. It may also mean that you have different types of plans for the different aspects of your time as a research student.

*Your success in your research degree will depend on your ability to reflect on, evaluate and modify what you do, so that you keep moving towards achieving your goals.*

**Exercise:** Have a go at preparing a draft timetable for your thesis project. Incorporate the sequence of tasks pertaining to the thesis, activities that prepare you with skills required for the research project, as well as anything else you can think of. Discuss as a group.
PEERS, COLLEAGUES, SUPERVISORS

Your thesis will not be a solitary pursuit. You will develop academic relationships both within and outside the university that will be crucial to your success in postgraduate studies. With little effort you can create a support structure that will last for the duration of your degree, and perhaps longer. There are several reasons why you should begin develop a working relationship with a network of peers early in your candidature:

- To avoid social and intellectual isolation.
- For guidance
- To maintain motivation and persistence
- To develop a generic skills base
- To promote collegiality
- Because it is personally rewarding and satisfying.

Question: Who are the people you will likely be working with over the course of your candidature?

Questions: In what context would you come in to contact with the above? Do you feel that participation in these forums is a valuable part of your research experience? Why?
Conferences,
How to find out about them? Make sure you are on mailing lists; identify the key journals in your field; look for and join academic associations or societies. However, be selective; choose to attend conferences that are relevant to your work.

SOURCES OF TRAINING

There are many training centres within the university where you can formally develop academic and professional skills. You have obviously found one of these places as you are here at this workshop today.

Learning, language and Research Skills Centre at Student Services – operates on what is termed a ‘non-deficit model’, that is, the team is proactive in delivering resources, workshops and advice on research and writing skills to all students, not just those who are having problems in their degree.

Organisational and Staff Development Services (OSDS) – this is the central university service that trains UWA staff in their ongoing professional and leadership development. OSDS runs an extensive workshop program (see calendar) to which all research postgraduates have access. Some of the more interesting or appropriate workshops being run in semester one include:

- How to give an interesting conference paper
- Managing your time
- Successful networking
- Writing for impact
- Building an academic portfolio

Centre for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning (CATL) – provides programs, resources and services that support and encourage teachers. A number of development opportunities are provided specifically for postgraduate students including teaching development through the Postgraduate Teaching Internship Scheme and the Introduction to University Teaching Programme.

UWA Extension – Offers a diverse range of courses, particularly in computer literacy both on line and on campus. These include short courses on Microsoft Word, PowerPoint and Excel. The full course list can be found at: www.extension.uwa.edu.au
CONCLUSION: HOW FAR DOWN THE TRACK ARE YOU?
Do you have a research field?

Have you checked out other theses in your field?

Have you done any literature searching?

Do you have a research question?

Do you have hypotheses?

Have you begun to write your proposal?

Do you have a strategic plan?

Do you have a supervisor?

Have you negotiated with your supervisor about meetings?

Have you negotiated respective responsibilities?

Do you have system for keeping track of references and data?

Do you have a plan for analysing your data?

Have you thought about how your life as a student fits into your life in general?