

Student Completion: The Long and Straight Road to Dr



By Dr. Jenny Diggle, Research Development Unit

This article is about the highs and lows of studying to achieve a PhD. It provides readers with an insight to the issues facing students who come to post graduate research for the first time and may be of particular interest to all those students who want to give up before the begin. A full paper on this will shortly be released as part of the RMIT Business Working Paper Series, and a presentation on the subject will be given at the next meeting of the Business Research Interns Group on Monday 2 December in 108.17.91.

Many students and normal people have asked me about the experience of being a PhD student. What skills do you need? How hard will it be? Realistically, how much time will it take? For me I was so naive when I started my PhD I didn't even know what questions to ask. But I got there in the end. In my mind, a triumph of tenacity over ability.

It all started with an idea. I had read an industry report on the global funds management industry and noted that Australian funds managers kept on average more than 10% of their assets in cash. I instantly thought of my time as a fund manager, and was critical of that holding being so high. For me the rationale for my research was straight forward – see if the Australian funds managers can actually outperform the world by having more in cash than other global managers and prove myself right.

I had been teaching in Hong Kong with my supervisor discussing what I was going to research and when I returned to Australia I formally enrolled and began an introduction to research with the subject Business Research

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Methods. In that class I sat in a room full of people who were passionate about their research – I didn't even have a topic. I wasn't sure what discipline I was in. I didn't know what a discipline was – I thought it was a form of punishment, which was probably the only thing that I had right at that stage.

Let me make it clear – I had no idea why I was there. This was not a fault of my supervisors. I didn't think to ask them these seemingly basic questions, particularly when I was in an environment where my peers, the other students, seemed so knowledgeable about what they wanted to do, what they thought they would find, and what epistemology and ontology actually meant. I was a finance person – numbers were my game. I was looking forward to torturing data until I got the answer I wanted. I didn't know what methods I'd use, but I was fairly certain there wouldn't be too much reflective practice, not a lot of focus groups and ethics approval was not going to be a dilemma for me.

However, I wasn't truly daunted at this stage. I had been a part time student all my learning life. I knew the plot. They start you out confused, you do the work, you sit the exam, you're still confused but able to answer a 30 mark question in 15 minutes. I knew time would be the great healer. All I had to do was read a little more. The other feeling I had when I set out was pride – I was a PhD student. I was a thinker. I was a writer. I was an investigator. I just wasn't a researcher.

So my next step was to spend hours, days, weeks, months defining what is research. The search for re. I became the great pretender. I had articles. Everywhere. In coloured folders. So I could find things easily. I didn't actually get around to reading too many of the articles, and I took a long time to decide how I should file them.

A year since enrolling and still no progress. I took the bull by the horns and volunteered to teach a new subject in the Master of Financial Planning that would involve me writing and researching all the materials. The subject matter was the background to my thesis and I knew that if I had to teach it, I would definitely know it before I went into the classroom. One of the benefits of being a lecturer is that in the classroom you walk in with a perceived advantage of knowing what you are talking about. During the class, one of the students asked me a question and in giving the answer, it crystallised the theory behind my research question. I frantically began to write it down. After much shuffling of feet and delicate coughs, one of the students asked me was I okay. I replied "Yes I'm just writing my thesis." This was the first moment I had experienced of other

people staring at me and me thinking what was their problem, whilst they were clearly thinking "The medication is wearing off". I was to experience that moment many more times during my candidature.

After these classes, I became inspired. I began making time to research. Juggling everything to ensure that I had no time to do anything but always feeling as though something should be done. I started reading more and taking notes. I began to write impressions of what I was reading. Then, as if it was a sign, I found a copy of the original work by the father of my research area. I bought it – significantly it was the most I had ever paid for a text book. Another sign. I took it home and as I read the flap jacket, I noticed that the person who's work I was going to criticise, whom I fundamentally believed was wrong in his methods, had won the Nobel Prize for his initial research. Right – I'm going to question a Nobel Prize winner. Sure. Not likely. So I shut the book and didn't mention anything about it until six months later when my supervisor asked me why wasn't I doing anything. I had the usual excuses – no time, too much marking, the silver needed polishing, how can anyone research when there are spider's webs in the architraves? I finally confessed that I was derailed and struggling to find a topic that interested me. Questioned as to what happened to my original idea, I outlined the significance of the flap jacket. My supervisor reminded me that the role of research is to question everything. The father of my discipline was right when he discovered the theory – but I could be the child of the effort and disrupt the matrimonial house by straying.

So I got back on track. I found an article about how to do literature reviews, but for a while it was like moving deck chairs on the Titanic. I collected more articles – it was clear that all I needed was a bigger literature review. I began creating piles about piles within piles on piles that should be in piles but not yet classified as a pile of its own. It was a beautiful system, designed to make all those who came to the house believe I was researching.



After presenting at my Schools research seminar which proved to be a demoralising experience I'd hit the wall. I had no questions, no data, no answers and no way. I was ready to give it away. I went to my office and into the room of mirrors for a long hard look at myself - why was I doing this? What about MY life? Who really cared but me? I went home and contemplated how I could explain this to my supervisor. I went to see him the next day and he was talking to another staff member who was a recent graduate of his. This staff member was less capable than me. I had a massive realisation - many more people had achieved what I had wanted to do, who were starting with less than what I had. I could do this, I just had to read more.

I began to sort the literature into ideas and themes. Three main themes started to show through that were related to my basic question. I actually put some articles in a box to be read later.

I became discriminate. Then I was reading a chapter in a text to try to get a better understanding of one of the concepts that was mentioned quite a few times in the articles. There it was. The single sentence that made me say – no that's where they've made the mistake. And I was away. Within a day I had written 3,000 words and had a structure to my thesis. I had a main question and a number of subsidiary questions. I knew what data I needed to test my theory. I had a theory. Then I had my own Nobel Prize moment. I read an article about Michael Jordan's basketball career – the gold medals, the best player, all time great etc etc etc. The articles had a time line with all his main achievements marked off. What if there was a link between Michael Jordan's basketball career and the S&P 500? I saw myself presenting at Harvard Business School, on my way to a European tour, before returning to a seaside villa in Australia. I saw the cover of Time magazine with me and Michael shaking hands – me standing on a box and him squatting down just to get us both in frame – and me telling everyone the story over dinner. And then I saw it for what it was – a diversion.

So I waded on. The path became bogged with models – and not the beautiful variety. I became aware that you can model anything, believing the outcome as if it were true. Excel was no longer my motto, it was my best friend. Hours and hours together, me pressing enter and it saying “#VALUE!”. It was the language of new knowledge, if only I could translate it.

By now, in a desperate attempt to understand research and to find re, I offered to team teach the Business Research Methods subject with my supervisor. Finally being able to define epistemology and ontology, but never knowing why, I urged others onto the pathway of research enlightenment. Don't tell me your name, tell me your question. This teaching inspired me to do more. However, one Saturday after a day long class I approached my supervisor with the idea that I wanted to change my topic. I was bored with it. I was going no where. I had found some things but nothing of great significance. The body of knowledge would barely gain a pound from my contribution. My supervisor gave me some very good advice. “Before you change topic, look at what you have already written and see if aspects of it can be used in a new topic.”

I combined all the words I had written into one document. I ran “properties” and “Statistics”. I had 45,000 words. Admittedly, in the end I probably ditched 10,000 of those original words, but it was amazing for me to think that I had written so much about this topic.

I was hooked.

I began sorting the rubbish from the reality and devising a system for organising my work into chapters. It was too dull to keep ploughing away at one thing, so I worked on a number of issues at once. I kept my chapters, the associated articles and the data on disk in plastic folders (of different colours). When I had a question about one aspect of the topic, I would take the whole envelope to my supervisor. That way I could show him where I had gotten the idea or methodology from, how I was applying it, and if need be, run the software to show him the models I was using. I sorted the literature, and counted the words. I found a formula that I not only understood, I was able to expand but also make new findings from the data. I found an ending to my work. I saw the light at the end of the tunnel and knew it wasn't a train. I really focussed on the writing and on the analysis, devoting at least one full day a week to my thesis, sometimes I could manage all week-end without interruption. I didn't need to work at this pace, I wanted to.

The personal gains I have had from my thesis being passed have been many.

The joy my family and friends have had from celebrating my achievement was completely unexpected. The purpose of this article is to add to the knowledge of getting knowledge. There are many tips to those of you picking up the research map and heading for your doctorate. Kind of like ten commandments without the commands.



- I. Don't expect to sit down one weekend and write your thesis, but do expect to sit down every weekend and write something.
- II. Remember you are a student – you can still ask questions. You don't get to be the expert until you've passed the PhD, so remember its still okay to be dumb.
- III. Criticism is just that – its not a plague on the nation. If you can't take criticism of your work, then get out now, because the only way to add to the body of knowledge is to first understand what exists about that body of knowledge, and then allow your contribution to be examined by the world. Criticism and research go hand in hand. Successful researchers use criticism to their betterment. Unsuccessful researchers take it personally.
- IV. Remember your goal and don't lose sight of the woods for the trees. Keep on track.
- V. Keep an open relationship with your supervisor – they have what you want - its up to you to get it out of them, not up to them to give it to you.
- VI. A literature review is a summary of the relevant literature to your research discipline, not everything you have ever read about the topic. Find a method for presenting your review, e.g chronologically or divided into your research sub-questions, and then place each article in its appropriate context.

- VII. Be critical and have an opinion about other people's research. You are not turning into a research clone, you are growing as an individual, learning and writing about new things. There is no requirement for you to agree with everything you read, or for you to try to incorporate it into your work, or for you to put a positive spin on work that you believe is incomplete or flawed.
- VIII. Always read your written work out aloud before you submit it. Set yourself up at home with the ironing board as your lectern. Take questions off the couch and the mirror. Allow the lamp to interject. In this way you improve your grammar and the flow of your work.
- IX. Start writing.
- X. Don't waste time and don't give up.

Some of you may think that my experience is unique. Others will seek to blame my supervisors for aspects of my experience as a student that were not conducive to good learning and research practice. However any fault in the process is truly mine. I didn't ask questions. I didn't actively seek supervision. When I asked for help, I always got it by the bucket load. When I was wrong in my analysis or conclusions, I was never damned by my supervisors, just encouraged to try other ways or to read other works. When I finally began asking questions, no question was ever treated as being insignificant, even though now I cringe when I think of some of the questions I asked. From my supervisors I learnt more than theory and application – I learnt how to get the best out of me and I hope, how I will get the best out of any research students who come my way in the future.



Recent Thesis Submissions

The RDU is pleased to announce that the following research students have recently submitted their thesis for examination:

Sheila Doyal from the School of Management, DBA

Thesis title: Challenges and success factors for information technology management: Evidence from a global case study.

Charles Lau from the Transport Research Centre, PhD

Thesis title: A cellular automation model for urban land use simulation.

Research Funding Opportunities



For details regarding other current research funding opportunities please visit the Research & Development Funding website which provides a list of grants, awards, scholarships and fellowships available to staff and students and is updated weekly at: <http://www.rmit.edu.au/browse?SIMID=jg30k3i1c6l>

Also for a listing of scholarships available please visit the Joint Academic Scholarship On-line Network (JASON) website. JASON is an on-line database of scholarship information for postgraduate students. For further information please visit: <http://jason.unimelb.edu.au>

Pacific Telecommunications Council- Research Proposals 2003

The Pacific Telecommunications Council (PTC), a non-profit, international membership organization that promotes the development and beneficial use of telecommunications in the Pacific Hemisphere, invites preliminary submissions of research proposals. The proposal should be in English (1,000 words max) and describe the nature and scope of the proposed project and its value within the context of the PTC. A separate timeline and estimated budget, a biography or short CV (250 words max), and a bibliography (250 words max) citing relevant work are also required. Authors of the most appropriate proposals may be requested to submit full proposals for final evaluation before 5 January 2003. PTC will announce the recipient(s) of the 2003 grant at the annual meeting of the Research Committee in January 2003 and notify the recipient(s) by 15 February 2003.

Proposals should deal with telecommunications and information technology issues relevant to PTC members and objectives (see http://www.ptc.org/about_us/index.html). PTC construes these issues broadly in order to have the opportunity to review as many applications as possible. Since this is PTC's 25th anniversary, proposals are invited that examine evolution in the field (e.g. technology, policy, industry structure, services, access in various regions, etc.). The methodology employed may be either empirical or theoretical. Their scope could be national, international or comparative.

When awarded, grants will be paid in 3 equal segments: one-third shortly after the award has been announced, one-third upon receipt of a satisfactory progress report (approx. 6 months later) and the final third upon acceptance of the final report by the Committee, no later than one year after the award is granted.

Value: US\$5,000 (max)

The RMIT protocol for electronic (email) submission is that they may not be lodged until the PVC R&D (Neil Furlong) has signed off on them. Please contact the Research and Development Section for details.

Internal deadline: Monday 9 December 2002

Preliminary proposals should be submitted by e-mail to richard@ptc.org or they may be submitted by fax to +1 801 751 7662 to the attention of Richard.

Dairy Research & Development Corporation—General Training and Development

The sponsor provides support for study tours, and attendance at conferences, seminars, workshops and short courses. Wherever possible, overseas travel applications should be built into specific DRDC-funded projects within the Farm and Manufacturing Portfolios. Any individual or organisation is eligible.

Closing date: OPEN

Professor Leigh Peterson (Coordinator, Technology Transfer, R&D Section) tel: 9925 7550 e-mail: lfpeterson@rmit.edu.au

For further information please see SPIN Database (accessible through the R&D website)

What's New in the RDU Library

Internal Research Report

RMIT Business Research and Publications Report 2001.

External Working Papers

Chiarella, C., Flaschel, P., Gong, G., and Semmler, W., 'Nonlinear Philips Curves, Complex Dynamics and Monetary Policy in a Keynesian Model', School of Economics and Finance, UTS Business, Working Paper No.120, October 2002, University of Technology Sydney.

Wilson, P.J., Zurbrugg, R., and Gerlach, R., 'Structural Breaks and Diversification: The Impact of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis on the Integration of Asia-Pacific Real Estate Markets', School of Economics and Finance, UTS Business, Working Paper No.121, October 2002, University of Technology Sydney.

May, R., Walsh, P., Harbridge, R., and Thickett, G., 'Unions and Union Membership in New Zealand: Annual review for 2001', Industrial Relations Centre, Working Paper 02/02, Victoria University of Wellington.

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The aim of this newsletter is to keep staff informed of research activity within RMIT Business and of research opportunities both outside and within the faculty. If you have any contributions (we are always interested in research or researchers for our feature article) that you think would be of interest to the faculty please contact Bronwyn Coate at the RDU.

The *Business Research News* is also available for viewing on the RDU's web site shortly after it has been distributed in paper form. The web site also contains information for research staff and students including the RDU's library holdings.