Finding the Light at the End of the Tunnel: Completion Strategies for Research Degrees

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Beginning a higher degree is not unlike embarking upon a long journey where the light at the end of the tunnel often seems elusive. However, the time does somehow flee once you move along the tunnel a little, and keeping on task and keeping in view your goal of a timely (and successful) completion is vital. What completion strategies, as candidate, supervisor and/or institutional level, are available to us?

Program Management
The use of program management techniques can enhance completion. While there are computer programs like Project Kickstart, you can adapt the techniques to suit your own context and needs. Goal setting is the way to start followed by the explication of tasks. Break down your goals into doable, sizeable chunks of activity. Consider the nature of the tasks and whether or not certain tasks need prime focus and concentration. Plan those tasks that demand less than your full energy (such as getting references in order) for times when you are perhaps tired or less able to give 100%. Use the high energy times for the important work, such as reading and writing. Big picture timelines are needed for overall planning and scoping. Look at the whole timeframe in front of you and break it down into major goals for significant time planning. Detailed timelines – even down to a day by day level – can help focus your activity and provide a way to monitor progress towards completion. This kind of planning goes well beyond the normal type of grant chart planning that Higher Degree committees often want.

Shadowing
The term shadowing is used here to mean heavy duty tracking of progress. Supervisors and postgraduate co-ordinators have a prime role in shadowing students in order to track development along the research journeys. However, you do need to track your own progress as well.

Such tracking can occur in various ways such as:
- Weekly updates on email
- Regular face to face meetings with supervisors
- Review panels in accordance with the faculty procedures
- Postgraduate conference presentations
- Conference presentations
- Faculty seminar presentations.

Short Term Scholarships
Short term completion scholarships to fund part time students for time out from work to achieve major steps in the research journey can help enormously. Crucial tasks that are best done in a block of time, such as data collection and/or writing up, can be well support by institutional scholarships. Failing this some students have long service leave owing and put the time to good use for completion of the thesis.

Other Forms of Financial Support
Apart from stipend scholarships and the short term completion scholarships that only few students gain, there are often other forms of financial support available to you. Contact your faculty research office or equivalent to find out what might be possible. Some faculties offer fiscal support for presentation at conferences especially when a publication will be forthcoming. Support for the transcription of data can help, as can photocopy cards and the like. The opportunity to do some part time tutoring or lab work might be on offer and can help with finances but also in terms of your CV and networks. Just make sure that you don’t take on too much and let this hinder your progress. Find out what help is available and check this out every year as policies do change.
A Space in Which to Work

Do you need a place to hide away and work? Is there an option for you to have a space at your institution? Most full time students are lucky enough to be catered for in this way. If you have not availed yourself of such a space, ask about the availability of a quiet spot. Having a work space away from home can really help in treating your research seriously and as a job in which office hours (at the very least) are adhered to, and where weekends can easily be spent free of well meaning but distracting family and friends.

Some institutions have a minimal resource policy for students – check this out. At RMIT all of our full time students have an office space or postgraduate computer lab in which to work. If this is not possible, find a place that suits you. Or if you do work at home establish some rules to make it work. For instance, no domestic work during PhD time. Plan your breaks. Do not allow yourself to be distracted by mundane tasks such as cleaning out cupboards. One student we know embarked on major renovation during her PhD. She completed on time but established rules around when this work was appropriate and kept her thesis the major focus. Letting others (family and friends) gently but firmly know that you have set times for working where you need to be left in peace (free from calls and/or visits) can really help. If you are sharing an office or a lab working out some kind of agreement about silent working times is imperative. Good ideas come and go but quickly and most of us cannot afford to be interrupted unnecessarily at such moments.

Routines: Predictability

Finding a routine that suits you can help. One routine for a very focused full time Education student went something like this (during the writing up phase):

8am Proof read draft from the day prior. Annotate in detail. (Note that drinking coffee can work wonders at this point of the day.)

10am Read relevant materials (notes of reading- kept on Endnote) to continue writing. Write.

1pm Short walk and lunch (often with another student)

1.30 pm Visit library for further resources if needed. Plan writing.

3 onwards (depending on how the writing is proceeding) Writing.

Before signing off at the end of the day (at whatever time that might be … if possible keep writing when you are on a roll …)

Document in detail what needs to be done on the following day.

Record issues in the research diary.

In particular, note any questions.

Do a word count for the day.

Check out the work plan.

Print a copy.

Some times varying where you work helps. For instance, proof reading can be done anywhere if you have a paper copy. So this activity can be one done out of the office to give yourself a change of scene. Some students proof read well in coffee shops where they feel less isolated, and have the comfort of a hot coffee but can still block out the noise to concentrate. In the end the ways of working are up to you. Being honest with yourself about how effective these ways of working are – in the end only you can really judge this.

Writing Groups

Writing groups can work wonders for those who need the additional pressure as well as feedback from a group of colleagues. The establishment of a writing group is something that you can do
yourself. You might need to ask your supervisors or others in the institution to help you link up with other students. Regular meetings in which ways of working are agreed from the outset can generate much commitment to, and motivation for, writing. Decide on how drafts are to be shared, the kind of feedback that will be provided, issues of honesty, trust and commitment (to sharing, to constructive critique), as well as how turns will be taken to produce some writing to the group. Some faculties bring in writing experts to run such group - perhaps this is an option that you can suggest. Alternatively, specific workshops based on expressed need are useful. See what is on offer within your institution.

Contracts
Planning an agreed contract with your supervisors (or even just with yourself) can enable you to stay focused and to review your progress. Some students make deals with their families – if this is written, then we will take a break. Some make agreements with fellow students – if by the end of the week we have all reached our goal then we shall meet to celebrate. This brings us to the issue of celebrating milestones.

Celebrate
When you reach a much sought after milestone- do take some time to celebrate. When you finish your proposal and gain ethics clearance, you have reached an early but significant goal. When you publish your first paper or give a conference paper – enjoy your success. But not for too long (okay we know that we are basically conservative) … When you finish a chapter – take a day off and do something that you like but do plan to resume the day after. Don’t lose momentum.

A Supportive Net
When you are studying within an institution, whether you are part time or full time, you have access to networks that are worth pursuing. Use the opportunities to meet others when you can – do go to the staff room, the postgraduate room, the seminar series, the late night lectures, and the structured programs (induction, targeted workshops, library sessions, research methods and so on). Develop a supportive net of colleagues and resources around you – such a research environment will motivate, support and help you to complete well and on time.

The light at the end of the tunnel will be more than in view …