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Managing your PhD progression: Tips for staying on track

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This paper presents my reflection and lessons learnt from my PhD journey. A PhD is a journey not only of research knowledge and understanding but also of personal perseverance through a maze of rules and writing (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). Completing a PhD enables a researcher to move from novice to a beginning level of experience. It would be over estimating students' abilities to call them experienced on completion; however students will set a standard for their chosen area (Willison & O'Regan, 2006). This paper will discuss the different stages of PhD progression from research question through to final completion and provide tips for overcoming hurdles.

The research question

Once enrolled the research question needs to be finalised, this is one of the first hurdles that must be crossed. The research topic needs to sustain the student's interest over time, have potential to make original contribution to the field and then a research question will need to be generated (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). Although finding a question seems like a simple task it is often difficult to refine a research question to one which is manageable and can be answered within a reasonable timeframe for completion of the degree. The student should be prepared to justify the chosen question, providing clear information around the topic. During this time students need to begin establishing themselves as researchers and develop networks of people who will be useful in the later stages of the PhD. Networks can range from academics to clinical professionals. Academics can provide advice and extension of ideas different from the supervisors. Clinical professionals such as registered nurses or key community liaisons may be useful contacts to provide access to participants.

Research framework

Choosing an appropriate research framework is another hurdle that requires a systematic approach to reading and summarizing a large amount of previous research. This process may feel like a waste of time; however any written summaries will be useful when writing the discussion and conclusion of the dissertation when clear links to framework must be visible.

Ethics

The process of obtaining ethical approval for the research can be difficult; students must learn the process and specific requirements to obtain permission to begin their study. There are several points to increase understanding of the ethics process. One of the first points is to begin the ethics application form as the research proposal is written, which ensures ethics requirements will be covered appropriately and reduces the chance of having to revise the method, especially the recruitment of participants. Specific university guidelines are provided to assist students through the process. Reviewing a similar ethics application assists with the understanding of the language required. For specific site requirements, actual visits or discussions with the ethics manager provides understanding and information on the specific requirements of the area, such as logo requirements, wording of consent, contact names and phone numbers of ethics manager and Ethics Committee meeting dates. Understanding these rules can often reduce the number of corrections needed after

review and feedback from the Ethics Committee.

Supervision - making it work for you

Students need to set the pace for the PhD so that they are more likely to continue and finalise (Kearns & Gardiner, 2006). Set an agenda for each meeting including the topics for discussion. Topics for discussion should meet the needs of students as they progress in the process. Write up questions as they occur add them to the agenda so they can be revisited during the meeting with minimal disruption to supervisor's workload. Follow up supervisor meetings with a written summary report; this serves to ensure clear understanding of information discussed and tasks to be completed. The supervisor summaries can also be revisited to provide a student with direction between meetings. One of the most important points to remember about supervisor revision and comments is that they are not a personal attack. During the PhD process every student will have many negative comments from supervisors, ethics committees, and journal and grant reviewers. It helps to remember that any comments are not personal and must be taken as direction for improvement - although a glass of wine often helps. Students should become comfortable with sharing their written work with friends, colleagues and supervisors; this allows for feedback and often generates different points of view for investigation.

Developing good writing habits: Management of literature and data

One of the main problems with a PhD is the length of time it takes to complete. Students start with great enthusiasm, however as time passes it is hard to maintain the pace of writing and positive attitude. One way is to write notes for later chapters as information is gathered. For example while writing the method chapter and completing recruitment of subjects, any problems can be written in note form for later discussion in the limitations. Another issue is the actual writing habit. Identify your own writing process and set specific achievable tasks to maintain the writing habit. For example 1000 words in a day will build to 5000 words in a chapter after a week. Measuring output allows for conceptualisation of PhD progress and personal reward of this progress. Remember to date all drafts to ensure consistent flow but also to ensure that notes on revisions can be accessed. Another important aspect of PhD writing is to ensure a clear explanation of what you are writing and the justification for this section of writing. An unfamiliar reader should be able to read a section and understand your topic and the importance of that piece of writing.

When completing a PhD part time while working it is important to write a short summary of what was covered and the direction for the next section of writing or reading after a period of PhD work has been completed. This reduces the risk of losing the thread of the topic that is being written but also of having to reread written work to identify what had been covered when returning to the work at a later stage.

Managing literature is another problem and good habits from the beginning will be appreciated in later stages of your work, especially during the writing of final chapters. Written summaries from journal articles allows for quick interpretation of information from a range of sources. The use of programs (such as Endnote) to organise literature provides easy access to abstracts, summaries, and keywords which can be incorporated into each file. Use keywords specific to your research topic such as Australian research, age group of participants, questionnaires used, to allow for identification of specific articles when needed.

The management of data is also a key issue. Good habits of saving of data are needed; complete notes regarding the process of data entry and analysis. Information about the process may be needed in later chapters and these points may not be remembered. The use of specific programs

assist this process and allow for easier analysis and recalling of data (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). The presentation of data in the PhD must follow specific rules and the use of supporting texts to ensure correct presentation can be very useful (APA, 2009; Perry, 1998; Polit, 2010; Rudestam & Newton, 2007).

Conceptualising progress is a very practical method to ensure continued progression. The student should write a plan for each semester, and then progress can be identified and rewarded as specific milestones are passed. PhD progress reports may be required and the student's plan and progression can easily be used for these. Incorporated into the plan should be any dates for conferences, including abstract requirements, grant or scholarship applications, and ethics or other reports required. A notebook of meetings and key people, either gate keepers for participants or ethics or recruitment personal, provides a paper trail of your PhD process that can be useful for method chapter or follow up on issues.

Another aspect of maintaining writing is to write a personal journal of the PhD experience, which can include personal difficulties and successes, notes for future direction, and reflections. Creative writing is often a beneficial process; poems or pictures can help conceptualise progress and experience. A PhD is a lonely process; PhD workshops provide opportunities to meet like-minded students, help focus the learning process, and can assist with writing skills (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). There are numerous resources developed to assist PhD progression and students needs to identify their learning needs so that appropriate resources can be used through the whole process.

Putting it all together for a cohesive product

Once the research process is finished the student must write up the final chapters of the PhD. This is often exciting as the end is in sight, but it can also be difficult as the large amount of data and literature must now be organised into clear ideas and conclusions for the thesis. Revisiting of previous literature will clarify the research framework and improve the consistency of the theoretical thread through the PhD. Allow time to read over previous writing and update and correct as needed. This is often a process of ensuring consistent terminology throughout the thesis. During the revision of chapters the student may note an improvement of writing skill and need to revise the earlier chapters in view of this. Perseverance is a key aspect during this period: set a plan, follow through, and organise revisions in timely fashion so the thread of the chapter is not lost.

Publishing

Throughout the PhD journey students must look for opportunities to present their research both in conferences and journals. If this is done through the PhD process the student stays current with the field and begins to establish a record as a beginning researcher, which can be a valuable head start on an academic or professional career.

Conclusion

The PhD journey is never simple or straight forward, but it is a rewarding process as the student develops research and writing skills in a specific discipline. PhD students need to develop perseverance and critical thinking skills as they complete and document their research project. Support from family, colleagues and supervisors are all vital in the successful completion of a PhD. Finally, reflecting on this process adds another enriching dimension to the experience.

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