

# 12 Tips for Completing Your Research Degree at PolyU

Adele Graham and Sam Graham



**FEELING LOST?** Starting your PhD or MPhil, you probably have some idea of what you are going to have to produce and hand to your examiners when your research is finished. However, right now, you might feel a bit unsure about how you are going to get there.

You will learn lots in the coming months. Learning from experience is important, and to help you skilfully navigate these months – and years ahead – we have put together 12 tips that we hope will help you (i) get to the endpoint (a quality thesis that passes) and (ii) make the most of your journey along the way. The ideas are not meant to be prescriptive, but are instead aimed to get you thinking. We have also included some resources, but you do not need to read them all! Use your initiative and take a look at those resources that you think may be useful to you.

## 1. Find out what is involved

Many research students talk about the effort they wasted because they started off with no real understanding of what was involved. Take some time at the outset to find this out. Any of the following books will give you an idea of the big picture as well as specific, in-depth information for the various stages. There are also some useful readings on the internet, and your *Research Student Handbook* is critical and essential reading.

### Resources

Phillips, E. & Pugh, D. (2005) *How to get a PhD: A Handbook for Students and their Supervisors*. Maidenhead, England: Open University Press. 4th ed. LB2386 .P47 2005.

Cryer, Pat. (2006) *The Research Student's Guide to Success*. Maidenhead, England: Open University Press. LB2395 .C787 2006.

Rugg, G. & Petre, M. (2004) *The Unwritten Rules of PhD Research*. Maidenhead, England: Open University Press. This is one of the best in this area.

The PolyU *Research Student Handbook* advises you about the course work you must complete, and the fundamental aims and requirements of your degree and how these are demonstrated. Get a copy from the Research Office or download from their site:

[https://my.polyu.edu.hk/Director/jsp/app/com/polyu/jsp/search\\_rshb2\\_frame.jsp?theme=blue](https://my.polyu.edu.hk/Director/jsp/app/com/polyu/jsp/search_rshb2_frame.jsp?theme=blue)

It can sometimes be useful to talk with others who have completed their research degrees. Forewarned is forearmed. If you know what might be coming you are better prepared to face it!

## **2. Build a good relationship with your supervisor**

Why is supervision so important? Good supervision will improve the quality of your work, help you develop professional skills, and increase your chances of completing on time.

Supervision is a two-way relationship. You have responsibilities to your supervisor(s), and they have responsibilities to you. Building a good relationship will make things easier. You will probably receive better support and will be more confident to ask questions. At the same time, do not expect a good relationship without fulfilling your end of the bargain – taking appropriate responsibility and good old fashioned hard work!

The following resources provide useful advice on how to manage your relationship with your supervisor.

### **Resources**

Vitae Researchers' Portal provides useful advice on *Supervision and Key Relationships*.

<http://www.vitae.ac.uk/1234/Supervision-and-key-relationships.html>

Mihir Bellare from the University of California at San Diego posts his thoughts on *The Ph.D Experience* for his current and prospective students in computer science and poses some no-nonsense questions for them to think about. Read the article and think about how you might respond to his questions if he were your supervisor. On the issues that he raises, do you know your supervisor's thoughts?

<http://www.cs.ucsd.edu/~mihir/phd.html>

*Research Supervision Guidelines* are documented in your *Handbook*. Read them so you know your responsibilities and those of your supervisor(s) and Head of Department in relation to your research and progress.

## **3. Learn about what is expected of good research**

How much do I need to learn? How much do I need to produce? Is my intended study good enough for an MPhil or PhD?

Good research will answer an interesting question in an intellectually or empirically rigorous way. Good research should be important to the field and have real-world implications. But this probably raises more questions for you than it answers!

Acting on the following suggestions will give you an idea of what you should be aiming for.

- ☺ Read Sections 1.1; 1.2; 1.3.3 of your *Handbook* about the respective requirements of an MPhil and PhD.
- ☺ Ask your supervisor what he/she thinks are the qualities of a good thesis.
- ☺ Find out about what examiners look for. At PolyU, examiners are asked to rate and comment on the *originality and significance of the work*; the *appropriateness of the methodology adopted*; the *quality of the presentation*; the *accuracy and quality of the results, if applicable*; the *appropriateness of the conclusions*; and the *adequacy of your references*. All the books that were mentioned in Tip 1 have good chapters on what you can do to recognise good research or what examiners look for when they are marking. Keep these points and questions in mind when you are doing your work.

- ☺ Ask around your department for the titles and authors of some excellent theses that have been completed in the last few years and read them. Important theses in your field can be borrowed through interlibrary loan. Learn from them rather than be intimidated by them.
- ☺ Particularly if you are a PhD student, have a discussion with your supervisor about what marks work as “original”.

### **Resource**

Georges, A. (1996). *The Research Thesis: What Examiners Look For*. The Applied Ecology Research Group. University of Canberra  
<http://aerg.canberra.edu.au/pub/aerg/eduthes4.htm>

## **4. Set targets, plan ahead, and manage your time**

One attribute that successful students have in common is that they plan ahead. While things might go wrong and do not always go according to schedule, having a plan will increase your chances of finishing on time and make the process a lot less stressful.

There are some useful resources that give you an idea about targets for different stages. You can also find tools that will help you plan and sort out any time management issues. Procrastinators, take a look!

### **Resources**

In *Managing your Research Project*, Vitae Researchers’ Portal ask you to think about the skills you possess and introduces some time and project management tools to help you effectively manage your project.

<http://www.vitae.ac.uk/1220/Managing-your-research-project.html>

Varun Grover’s *How am I Doing: Checklist for Doctoral Students at Various Stages of their Programme* provides a great set of questions for managing your studies in a productive way and steering yourself into a career. Grover’s checklist is for a four year research degree but you can adjust this checklist to suit your personal timeline.

[http://www.decisionsciences.org/DecisionLine/Vol37/37\\_2/37\\_2phd.pdf](http://www.decisionsciences.org/DecisionLine/Vol37/37_2/37_2phd.pdf)

*Study Guides and Strategies* has some interactive tools for analysing your time use, developing a schedule, managing your time and strategising to overcome time-management problems. However, do not spend too long on these if you are a procrastinator and looking for an escape from your writing!

<http://www.studygs.net/timman.htm>

Mind Tools is rich in advice and tools for *Time Management* and *Project Planning*.

[http://www.mindtools.com/pages/main/newMN\\_HTE.htm](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/main/newMN_HTE.htm)

The University of Auckland provides their students with *The Doctoral Calendar*, a tool for *Visualising the Degree*. Complete a timeline for yourself and get some feedback from your supervisor. Put your Calendar by your desk and monitor your progress.

[http://www.postgrad.auckland.ac.nz/uoa/fms/default/uoa/for/postgradstudents/currentstudents/administration/policies-guidelines/docs/Student\\_PhDcalendar.pdf](http://www.postgrad.auckland.ac.nz/uoa/fms/default/uoa/for/postgradstudents/currentstudents/administration/policies-guidelines/docs/Student_PhDcalendar.pdf)

The American Psychological Association gives advice on *Overcoming Procrastination: Getting Organized to Complete the Dissertation*.  
<http://www.apa.org/apags/edtrain/overproc.html>

## **5. Prepare for scheduled meetings and keep records**

Your supervisor is there to guide you through your thesis. For this to happen, you will have to meet regularly. The regularity of meetings might change as you progress through your studies. For the first six months it may be necessary to meet weekly, and then every two weeks for the next six months. After that, fortnightly or monthly may be sufficient until the final stages where you will probably need to meet more often. These are only very rough guidelines.

Some people might see their supervisor far more regularly in labs. However often these informal meetings happen, arranged and dedicated meetings should also be regularly scheduled.

When you do have a meeting, it is important you make the most of it. Here are some things you can do:

### **Before the meeting**

- Review your “minutes” and progress from the last meeting.
- Identify problems/difficulties.
- Decide what you need from the meeting (draft an agenda and send it to your supervisor several days ahead).

### **During the meeting**

- Confirm the agenda and add in items from your supervisor(s).
- Work through the various items, always asking for clarification when you do not understand.
- Set a date and goals for the next meeting.

### **After the meeting**

- Write up the minutes and send them to your supervisor for confirmation. This is important as it provides you with a road map between meetings and a point of reference for both you and your supervisor if problems arise.

### **Resource**

*Meet Mr Postgrad* takes a light-hearted look at a student who wastes his own time and that of his supervisor. Any lessons here?  
<http://www.stuco.demon.co.uk/mrpost/index.html>

## **6. Read effectively, keep an accurate record of what you and keep up to date with new developments**

Make sure that you are reading effectively. Your reading should not be used as an excuse to avoid other work. Some of the resources below outline good reading strategies.

### **Resources**

*Effective Reading* from The University of Auckland. Preview, read and review strategies are described to help you read effectively and efficiently.

<http://cad.auckland.ac.nz/index.php?p=effective>

*Effective Reading Strategies* from The University of Otago provides advice on strategies that are crucial for research students, including skim reading, critical reading, analysis and evaluation of merit.

<http://hedc.otago.ac.nz/hedc/sld/Study-Guides-and-Resources/Effective-Reading-Strategies.html>

*Evaluating Web Pages: Techniques to Apply & Questions to Ask* is provided by UC Berkeley. Do not bypass this very useful tutorial.

<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/Evaluate.html>

*About Plagiarism and How to Avoid It*. Download this PolyU publication or get a hard copy from the EDC.

[http://edc.polyu.edu.hk/PSP/Plagiarism\\_Booklet.pdf](http://edc.polyu.edu.hk/PSP/Plagiarism_Booklet.pdf)

For referencing, find out what referencing style is used in your discipline and get into the habit of using it. Use referencing software from the start to help you manage and format your references. RefWorks is available from the PolyU library, but you might prefer to purchase your own copy of EndNote. Investigate the respective advantages of the different options that are available.

### **Resources**

*Referencite* developed by The University of Auckland, collects everything you need to know about referencing in one place. Included are referencing wizards, information about referencing software and instruction on how to avoid plagiarism. Highly recommended.

<http://www.cite.auckland.ac.nz/>

*Referencing Resources* available from Curtin University of Technology provides information about styles and the rules that apply to each. <http://library.curtin.edu.au/referencing/>

Keeping up to date with new developments in your field demands that you make use of the library and continue to develop your information seeking skills.

### **Library Advice and Support**

Explore Pao Yue-Kong Library's *Homepage* and *User Information for Postgraduate Students* to find out about the wide array of services that you have access to.

<http://www.lib.polyu.edu.hk/>.

<http://www.lib.polyu.edu.hk/userinfo/pg>

You will at least know where to start when you want to obtain literature from other libraries, read PolyU theses, develop specific research and career skills (there are online tutorials and face-to-face workshops), create a bibliographic database (RefWorks), access RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds and more! RSS, if you do not already know, enables you to keep up to date with new content information. When a journal or website that you subscribe to is updated, you will be automatically told and sent a summary of the new content. This means that you will not miss out on vital information.

*Ask a Librarian* will provide you with information about accessing a librarian (including your faculty or school librarian) by telephone, electronically, or face-to-face. Contact details are also provided for your faculty or school librarian who can provide you with invaluable advice.

### **Resources**

Indiana University gives more information about RSS and how to subscribe to and use feeds.  
<http://www.cs.indiana.edu/csg/FAQ/WWW/rss.html>

The University of Nevada provides a list of journals with RSS feeds.  
<http://www.library.unr.edu/ejournals/alphaRSS.aspx>

## **7. Write early, write often, and get help if you need it**

Writing a whole thesis can be a daunting prospect. Some students find it difficult to bring all of their ideas together. Writing through some of your ideas and findings as you go is a good way to structure unorganised thoughts and some of it may be useful for your final copy. Here are some ideas to get you writing:

- Try “nutshelling”. This is a technique where you quickly write, for about 15 minutes, a synopsis of what you are trying to say in your thesis. Write to keep up with your thoughts rather than worrying about grammar and spelling.
- Write a short review (a page or so) of every relevant article that you read.
- After reading a number of relevant articles on a particular theme, you might write a comparison of the articles and comment on their relevance to your research.
- Write a progress report, identifying problems and possible solutions. You might want to do this monthly or keep a regular journal.
- Free-write through problems and blocks. In free-writing it is important that you do not worry about grammar and spelling.
- Some chapters, such as your literature review or your methodology, can be drafted early.

By writing early, you will also become better at expressing yourself in academic language and you will improve your written English. This is important because external examiners are persistently critical of theses with poor grammar and badly chosen words. If you need help with your writing, the sooner you seek it the better.

## **PolyU support for your writing**

The English Language Centre (ELC) <http://elc.polyu.edu.hk> provides a variety of services. If you are worried about your English skills or want an expert opinion on your research writing skills, individual appointments could be made with the Centre for Independent Language Learning through the Writing Assistance Programme <http://elc.polyu.edu.hk/WAP> (subject to resources available).

The Department of English (ENGL) offers a language support service to research students through its well established programme Effective English for Postgraduate Research Students (EEPRS). This advanced academic English programme offers research students assistance with their dissertations and other research-related writing through its workshops on writing research articles and its popular mentoring service, which enables students to receive detailed feedback on their writing in hour-long, one-to-one sessions with the department's experienced professors. For more information about the mentoring service, please call Carolyn Lui on 2766 7572.

If you have sat the *Research Language Skills Assessment* and have been recommended to take some subjects to enhance your English skills, descriptions of the relevant subjects/programme\* are available at the following URLs:

- “ELC5001 Advanced English for Academic Purposes”, “ELC6001 Presentation Skills for Research Students” and “ELC6002 Thesis Writing for Research Students” at <http://elc.polyu.edu.hk/subjects/default.htm> of the ELC.
- “English Language Enhancement Programme (ELEP)” at <http://elc.polyu.edu.hk/elep> of the ELC.
- “ENGL6002 Communication Strategies in Research Contexts in English (CSRCE)”, “ENGL6004 Advanced Oral Skills for Research Students” and “ENGL6005 Writing Research Articles” at <http://engl.polyu.edu.hk/eeprs/> of the ENGL.

\* The relevant subjects/programme are subject to changes. You are urged to visit the specified websites and read the latest email notifications about subject registration issued by the Research Office for updated information.

The Research Office (RO) also provides a service for editing confirmation reports and research publications. There is, however, an hourly cost for this service.

## **Resources**

Murray, R. (2002) *How to Write a Thesis*. Buckingham, England: Open University Press. [LB2369 .M87 2002](#). If you know writing is a problem for you, borrow this book from the library. It provides writing advice from start to finish of your thesis.

Joe Wolfe from The University of New South Wales writes on *How to Write a PhD Thesis*. This guide was originally written for graduate students in physics but students in other disciplines will also find it useful.

<http://www.phys.unsw.edu.au/%7Ejw/thesis.html>

Steven Krause's web-based research writing textbook, *The Process of Research Writing*, contains a chapter *The Antithesis Exercise*. This exercise may be a good challenge for those of you who enjoy the writing process, but do not start here if you are already finding writing a struggle!

<http://www.stevendkrause.com/tprw/chapter8.html>

## 8. Get feedback about your written work

Feedback is very important. It confirms that you are going in the right direction and helps you understand what you need to strengthen or change. You can improve the quality of your feedback by helping your supervisor in the following ways:

- ◆ Ask your supervisor(s) how long they need to read your work. Make sure that you give them that amount of time before you meet with them to discuss it.
- ◆ Attach a cover sheet about the status of the work and particular feedback you want.
- ◆ Mark any areas on your draft that you are particularly concerned about.
- ◆ Before you hand your work in, read it through and imagine you are your supervisor reading it. Make amendments if you know how it can be improved.
- ◆ Have a friend read your work and incorporate any advice that will improve the content or the writing. By doing so, you can save your supervisor unnecessary effort.
- ◆ Make use of computer tools to check your spelling and grammar.

### Resources

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has an excellent paper, *Getting Feedback*. It describes when, where, how and from whom you might receive effective responses as you develop as a writer.

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/feedback.html>

## 9. Get published

Finishing your PhD or MPhil, you might find that your publications are as important as your thesis. This is especially true if you want to continue in academia, where your publications might be even more important than your thesis.

Like writing early and often, preparing publications can also help you toward completing your thesis.

### Resources

*How to Write-up Your Research for Publication* provides useful advice about how to go about it.

<http://www.anu.edu.au/BoZo/Scott/DoughtyPublish.html>

*How to Publish a Scientific Paper* is a succinct and useful checklist.

<http://www.anu.edu.au/BoZo/Scott/Publishing.html>

*How to Have Your Abstract Rejected* provides useful reminders of common pitfalls.

<http://www4.informatik.tu-muenchen.de/~nipkow/misc/reject.html>

## **10. Build networks**

By making an effort to network, you can give yourself access to whole groups of people that might be useful to your work (and you to theirs), either now or in the future.

You can meet academic staff (other than your supervisor) and students who can give you advice on your work. It can help you foster an appreciation of the research culture in your department and within the university. Meeting people from other disciplines can help you to understand what is going on in different and related areas.

Conferences can be useful for becoming known and promoting your work, and get you early access to the work of others. Making a good impression demands that you polish your presentation skills, so look out for opportunities to do this.

### **Resources**

*Mastering your PhD: Making the Most of a Conference*

[http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career\\_development/previous\\_issues/articles/2007\\_03\\_23/caredit\\_a0700039/\(parent\)/68](http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_development/previous_issues/articles/2007_03_23/caredit_a0700039/(parent)/68)

*Mastering your PhD: Give a Great Presentation*

[http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career\\_development/previous\\_issues/articles/2006\\_10\\_20/mastering\\_your\\_ph\\_d\\_giving\\_a\\_great\\_presentation/\(parent\)/68](http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_development/previous_issues/articles/2006_10_20/mastering_your_ph_d_giving_a_great_presentation/(parent)/68)

The Internet can put you in touch with research students internationally.

### **Resource**

*Postgrad Forum* is a great discussion forum for postgraduate students worldwide. The forums on this website give you insight into the work of other students, their problems and successes. It is interesting to see the advice that rolls in. If you are looking for frank advice, this is one place to go. <http://www.postgraduateforum.com/>

## **11. Know what is involved in the examination process**

Know what work you are required to produce and classes you must attend over the coming years. Read your *Handbook* so that you know how many taught or guided study credits you need to take and what marks you must attain in these.

Although handing in your thesis and the oral examination may seem like a long time away, attending the oral exams of other students in your department can prepare you and offer you an insight into others' work.

### **Resources Available from the Research Office**

Two briefing sheets are available from the Research Office.

*Editing Your Thesis for Submission: A Checklist for PolyU Research Students* will help you proof read your thesis.

*Preparing for your Oral Examination at PolyU* provides information on the purpose of the oral, what you can expect, and how you can prepare.

## **12. Take responsibility for yourself**

It is your thesis so it is important to take control over your work and your life at PolyU!

Be proactive about implementing any of these tips that you think will help you. Find out what you need to know, read your *Handbook*, make sure to ask questions and initiate discussions with your supervisor, make good use of the services, and take up opportunities such as workshops that are offered to you.

Monitor your own behaviour that might get in the way of your completion. If you find that you are avoiding your supervisor, frequently changing your topic or method, stretching your schedule or procrastinating, then do something about it.

Take care of yourself as you study. Take time out and keep things in perspective. Do not underestimate the importance of rest and exercise. Have fun with your friends, and do not forget to laugh sometimes! If you are having a tough time, the Counselling Services of the Student Affairs Office offers a free service.

### **Resources**

*How to Survive your PhD*. David Gauntlett, a PhD survivor, wrote this one page survival guide on a train. This is a resource worth printing to hang on your wall.

<http://www.theory.org.uk/david/phdtips.htm>

*PhD Comics* shows that, even with serious work, you can find something to laugh about.

<http://www.phdcomics.com/>

*Resources and PolyU Support*

Personal Counselling Service, Student Affairs Office

[http://www.polyu.edu.hk/sao/cs/counselling\\_services/](http://www.polyu.edu.hk/sao/cs/counselling_services/)

Here are our final recommendations for resources. You may find what you are looking for here if you have not found answers to your questions and problems in the tips and resources that we have provided.

### **Resources**

*Mastering your PhD: Series Index* from the journal Science.

[http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career\\_development/previous\\_issues/articles/2006\\_11\\_10/mastering\\_your\\_ph\\_d\\_series\\_index/\(parent\)/68](http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_development/previous_issues/articles/2006_11_10/mastering_your_ph_d_series_index/(parent)/68)

*Postgraduate Resources* from The University of Auckland Student Learning Centre

[http://cad.auckland.ac.nz/index.php?p=slc\\_resources\\_postgrads](http://cad.auckland.ac.nz/index.php?p=slc_resources_postgrads)

# Good working, good luck!

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