CHAPTER 10

Taking charge: Using personal learning plans

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INTRODUCTION

As a doctoral research candidate you have probably entered your program with great enthusiasm, are passionate about your topic and are seeking to create new knowledge. Many candidates record early in candidature that they want to make a difference to the world through the application of their contributions and discoveries and as such create their own professional niche. However, the doctoral experience is often characterised by changing expectations, tensions, stress, contradictions and even self-doubt. Many of these negative experiences arise due to the lack of a structured approach to the program that is embarked upon. For you as a research candidate it is fundamental that you capture the initial excitement, enthusiasm and naïveté into a process that does not stifle your creativity. There are a number of strategies that you can employ to construct a positive experi-

ence and, at the same time deliver an outcome that is stimulating, rewarding and meets your personal goals and aspirations. Developing a personal learning plan in consultation with your supervisor is one such strategy.

A PERSONAL LEARNING PLAN—SHOULD YOU DEVELOP ONE?

The idea of a personal learning plan originated in the literature which focuses on student learning: students' attitudes and motivation to learn, how students learn, where and when they learn, the outcomes of learning and how students build on their learning over time (Biggs & Moore 1993; Entwistle 1998; Prosser & Trigwell 2000). The following principles drawn from this literature form the rationale for the use of personal learning plans in the postgraduate research context.

- Learning as a doctoral candidate requires skills and knowledge beyond those developed as an undergraduate student. A personal learning plan will assist to identify the skills and knowledge that need further development.
- Doctoral research candidates are lifelong learners who bring to their research personal knowledge and experience that is to be valued, respected, used and nurtured. Many research candidates also bring to their studies a diversity of academic expertise, workplace skills and professional experience. Your personal learning plan will acknowledge and build on the capacities and skills that you already possess.
- While learning for doctoral candidates occurs primarily within the context of their thesis, it is critical that all researchers, particularly those who are in the early stages of their careers, engage in a diversity of learning contexts including a range of disciplines, research methodologies and backgrounds. Many of the learning opportunities you identify in your learning plan will engage you in exciting and rewarding conversations and activities with others.
- Doctoral candidates can take control of, and take responsibility for, their own learning and through interaction with others design their own learning paths. This activity is not something that someone else is doing for, or to, you, but something you determine, with help from your supervisors who are there to guide and advise.

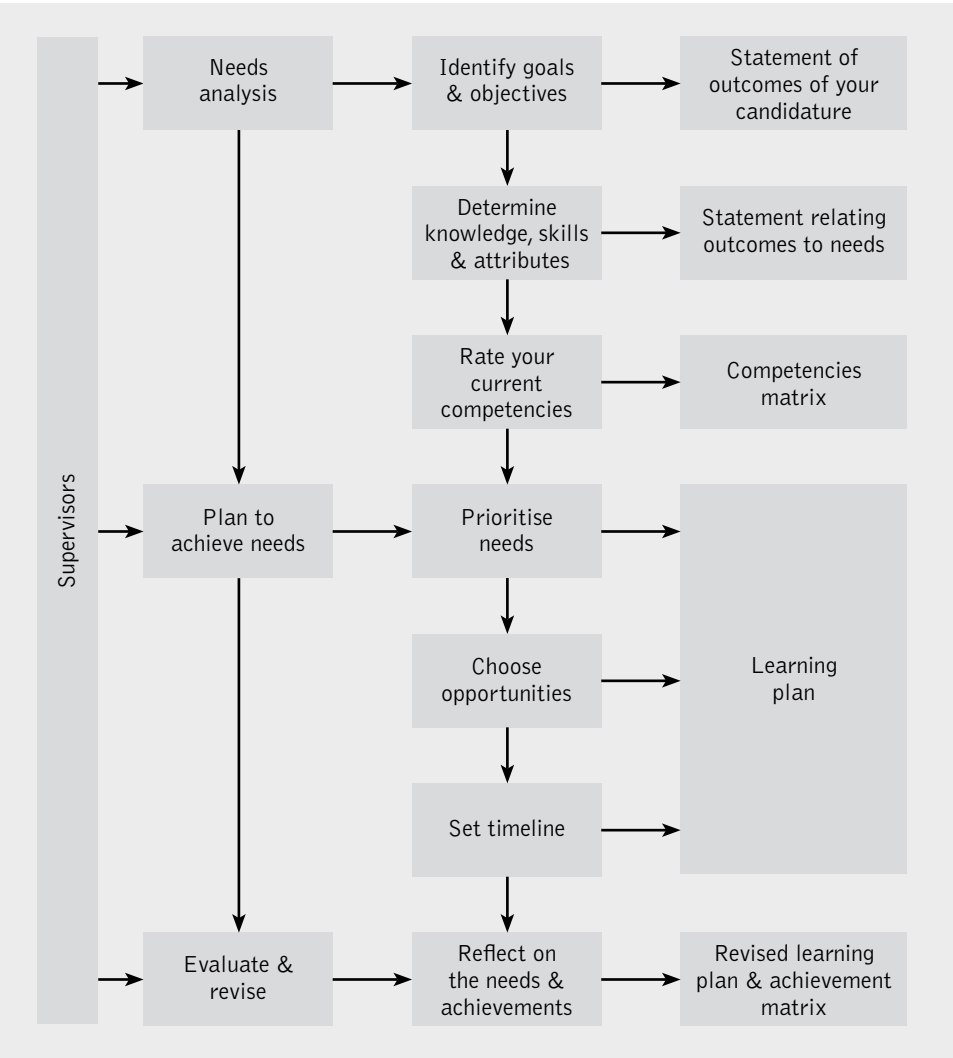
A personal learning plan provides a structured process to help you think about what you want from your doctoral experience and what you will need to do to achieve a successful outcome. It allows you to document your goals, how and when you will go about achieving each one, and how you will know that you have achieved them. As well the personal learning plan documents your current skills, and identifies those you will need to acquire as you work through your candidature to help you complete your research program successfully.

HOW DO YOU MAKE A LEARNING PLAN?

Undertake a needs analysis

A needs analysis will identify and document the knowledge, skills and attributes you bring to your postgraduate research experience, those you wish to develop through your research, and those you will need to prepare you for life after graduation (see Figure 10.1).

Figure 10.1 **Process for developing your learning plan**



To begin, reflect on your reasons for undertaking a doctorate and discuss these with your supervisors. Record your goals and your expectations for your research, and the career objectives you wish to work towards, as a statement of outcomes for your candidature. Your supervisors can facilitate this process by adding, where relevant, their knowledge of previous postgraduate candidate needs and their knowledge of your institution's expectations and requirements.

Once you have clarified and documented your goals and objectives (that is, identified the outcomes you seek to achieve), continue your needs analysis to determine the knowledge, skills and attributes you already bring with you, and those that you wish to develop further over your candidature, to achieve these outcomes. Here again, your supervisors can provide guidance and contribute institutional knowledge.

In today's higher education context, universities seek to create quality learning and teaching environments for all learners to produce the work-ready graduates demanded by employers. Some institutions have made it a priority to strengthen the links between the research experience, research outcomes and research graduate qualities. Many universities have developed lists of graduate qualities that are often described as generic skills or transferable skills—some of these qualities that you have developed in your undergraduate courses will stand you in good stead as you think through your needs.

At the University of Canberra we have identified six key learning areas—knowledge, inquiry, communication, organisation, creativity and ethical practice—and for each of these areas learning outcomes have been articulated. As an example, the learning outcomes identified for the key learning area 'Inquiry' follow.

> The research graduate should **understand** the inquiry philosophies, theories and practices in addressing research issues and **appreciate** different methodological approaches.
>
> The research graduate should develop higher order critical thinking skills in order to **investigate**, **formulate** and **apply** a range of approaches to problems including critical analysis and interpretation of research outcomes.
>
> The research graduate should **evaluate critically** and **question** the philosophies, theories and practices, and research outcomes in the research field.

Developing a series of explanatory/clarifying statements to further contextualise your understandings of the knowledge, skills and attributes you have identified will be helpful at this stage. Below are examples of statements used by doctoral candidates at our institution to relate the University's key learning area 'Inquiry' to their individual understandings of the notion of 'Inquiry' and to the context in which they will undertake their inquiry.

> I understand how theories and practices are developed in my field
>
> I am familiar with the range of research methods available across different disciplines

I am familiar with the research methods commonly used in my field
I understand the basic principles of research design
I can critically reflect on my research design
I can critically question the philosophies, theories and practices used in my field
I can formulate researchable problems
I can develop appropriate and achievable research questions
I can interpret research questions within the existing literature
I can identify appropriate methodologies and methods
I can develop a coherent argument to support the chosen methodology/method
I can analyse and interpret research outcomes

At this point in your needs analysis you will have developed two documents:

1 a statement of the desired outcomes for your research experience; and
2 a list of the key areas of knowledge, key skills, and attributes you feel you need to achieve these outcomes.

You are now in a position to identify which of these areas of knowledge, skills, and attributes you already possess and those you will need to develop over your candidature. A scale such as the one below will assist you to rate your current position.

Rating	Descriptor	The extent to which …
1	Very Well	I feel confident in my ability in this area
2	Satisfactory	I have some understanding of this attribute, but I could improve
3	Needs Attention	I need to improve my ability in this area
4	Needs Considerable Attention	I need to put considerable effort into developing this attribute further
5	Not Appropriate	This attribute is not appropriate to my thesis, nor to my personal or professional development needs at this stage

Documenting the outcomes of your rating is the next step. An example for the key learning area 'Inquiry', of a competency matrix documenting existing competencies and areas for development over candidature (Table 10.1) is shown below.

To get the most out of your needs analysis consider the following tips.

- Your goals, expectations and career objectives will help you choose a range of skills and attributes against which to assess your needs.
- Consult widely as you undertake your needs analysis. Ask other students and their supervisors. Talk to your supervisors and colleagues. Seek the advice of friends and family.
- Seek help from your institution's career advice centre.

Table 10.1 **Stage 1: Extract from a competency matrix**

Statements	Rating	An example of my existing competency	Ways I could go about developing this competency
I understand how theories and practices are developed in my field	3		Ask my supervisor for a list of key texts. Search the library catalogue and databases for a range of texts. Discuss this list with supervisors. Identify key texts to read. Review these texts. Discuss reflections with journal club, supervisory panel or experienced researchers in my field. Attend a meeting of my professional association and discuss how theories and practices are developed with experienced professionals in my field.
I am familiar with the range of research methods commonly used in my field	1	As a management consultant I used quantitative methods (eg survey of use of of sporting facilities) and qualitative methods (in-depth interviews with facility managers).	
I am familiar with the range of research methods available across different disciplines	4		Attend thesis proposal & work-in-progress seminars of students in other faculties. Attend a university-wide research methods course. Attend a conference where the focus is on research methods. Read the methods chapters of theses from other disciplines available through the Australian Digital Theses Program.

- Evaluate the advice from others in the light of your needs.
- Be honest: don't underestimate (or overestimate) your existing knowledge, skills and attributes. Find someone you can talk to honestly.

DEVELOP A LEARNING PLAN TO ACHIEVE YOUR NEEDS

Completing your needs analysis is the first (and most lengthy) stage in developing your personal learning plan. It is now time to turn your attention to the second stage in the process of developing a learning plan outlined in Figure 10.1.

Begin by prioritising the areas of knowledge, skills and attributes you have identified in your competencies matrix for ongoing development over your candidature. Next think about when you will need to have acquired the skill, area of knowledge or attribute: record the year, and the time during the year, you will be working to achieve the desired outcome. Finally, choose from the list of 'Ways I could go about developing this competency' what will best help you achieve the desired skill or attribute and record your choice. Table 10.2 illustrates a plan of action based on the competency matrix presented in Table 10.1. This is your learning plan.

Table 10.2: **Stage 2 A plan to achieve the needs identified in the competencies matrix shown in Table 10.1**

Statements	Rating	An example of my existing competency	Timeline	Ways I could go about developing this competency
I understand how theories and practices are developed in my field	3		2005 April–June	Ask supervisor for list of key texts Review these texts. Discuss review with journal club and supervisory panel
I am familiar with the range of research methods commonly used in my field	1	As a management consultant I used quantitative methods (for example survey of use of sporting facilities) and qualitative methods (in-depth interviews with facility managers).		
I am familiar with the range of research methods available across different disciplines	4		2005 Semester 1	Attend a university-wide research methods course.

Looking back to Figure 10.1 you can see that your supervisors are there to guide you through the process of prioritising your needs. Your supervisors can also introduce you to candidates who are at different stages of their candidature who can act as sounding boards and who can share their experiences to assist you in developing time lines.

EVALUATE AND REVISE YOUR LEARNING PLAN

At particular milestones in your candidature (for example, after you present your research proposal, after your mid-candidature work-in-progress seminar,

Table 10.3: **Stage 3 A personal learning plan including evidence of achievement of each competency**

Statements	Rating	An example of my existing competency	Timeline	Ways I will go about developing this competency	Evidence of achievement of competency
I understand how theories and practices are developed in my field	3		2005 April–June	Ask supervisor for list of key texts. Review these texts. Discuss review with journal club and supervisory panel	Applied the understandings of what knowledge is, how knowledge is created and disseminated, in my field, gained from my investigations and discussions, to write the section of my methodology chapter justifying my choice of a research framework.
I am familiar with the range of research methods commonly used in my field	1	As a management consultant I used quantitative methods (for example survey of use of sporting facilities) and qualitative methods (in-depth interviews with facility managers).			
I am familiar with the range of research methods available across different disciplines	4		2005 Semester 1	Attend a university-wide research methods course.	Distinction grade achieved for the university-wide research methods subject in which I enrolled during semester 1. The specific learning outcomes achieved were: …….. ……..

each year when you complete your annual progress report with your supervisor,) it will be time to 'take stock'. That is, to revisit your personal learning plan, critically reflect on and document your achievements, and review and revise your priorities and time line.

One way to document your achievements would be to modify the plan of action developed at stage 2 (Table 10.2) to reflect the achievement of competencies in the areas you nominated as 'needing attention'. To do this, add one more column to Table 10.2 and head this column 'Evidence of achievement of competency'. In this column record the evidence that indicates you have achieved each competency. Your learning plan now looks like the document in Table 10.3.

Your learning plan is now in a format that you can use to provide evidence to employers of the knowledge, skills and attributes (that is, the generic capabilities) you possess on completion of your research degree. Your learning plan can become part of your employment portfolio and be drawn upon to support claims against selection criteria in a job application.

CANDIDATES' REACTIONS TO PERSONAL LEARNING PLANS

From our experiences as supervisors, our candidates have indicated that the concept of being proactive and taking charge of their learning may be unexpected and indeed confronting. Feeling uncertain and unprepared for such a process so early in the candidature has been a common response. Many also felt that the work in creating a learning plan was a significant time impost and a distraction from tackling the doctoral research program. However, as these candidates began to work on developing their plans they realised that many of their needs could be met within the context of their thesis; thus very little 'extra' work was required. Candidates have agreed that in the process of developing their learning plans they have clarified their expectations of their doctoral studies (and their supervisors) and, through the increased interaction, established a more comfortable and open relationship with those supervising them.

GETTING THE BEST OUT OF YOUR PERSONAL LEARNING PLAN

There are a number of challenges to taking charge and maximising the value of your personal learning plan. Just coming up with such a document is probably new and confronting and presents a challenge in analysing your strengths and weaknesses and deciding your career goals and aspirations. It is often not easy to undertake an honest appraisal of yourself; however, your supervisors, colleagues and friends can offer assistance.

Unfortunately, some people consider formalising any activity into a planned process as unnecessary bureaucracy. However, in situations where there is an

underpinning necessity to succeed, continually hone skills and achieve outcomes in the process, there is a necessary requirement to plan—the undertaking of your doctorate is no exception.

The development of a learning plan to chart your research activities is not an onerous task and the time spent developing and maintaining the plan will be rewarded by improved efficiency in undertaking your research. We have estimated that preparing and maintaining a learning plan will take less than 5 per cent of your total project time assuming a three-year project. Putting this into an everyday context, it is the same preparation of time it would take to fill your car with fuel for a 500 km trip. Would you start out on such a trip without first spending 5 per cent of the total trip time to ensure you had sufficient fuel to get to your destination?

There are significant differences in supervisory styles and not every supervisor may warm to the concept of a more formalised planning process. However, more and more supervisors are becoming aware of the need to create a positive learning experience for their PhD candidates. They recognise that this experience should provide them with the necessary skills, not only to undertake and complete a doctoral program, but also to enhance employment opportunities on graduation.

Once you have developed a plan it is critical that you do not become obsessed with it. Learning plans are living documents that should be reviewed and updated on a regular basis. The direction of research projects change frequently and modifying the learning plan to accommodate those changes and the different demands they place on you is in itself an essential generic skill to acquire. In time, and with practice, this process will become second nature to you and will assist you to cope with the uncertain outcomes that characterise research endeavours. Of course it this uncertainty and the chance of an unexpected finding that creates excitement. Many discoveries are serendipitous!

Personal learning plans are a tool to help you get the best outcomes from your doctoral experience. We have presented a structured approach by which we believe you can identify your personal goals and aspirations, and a means by which you can take charge and have a successful and enjoyable doctoral experience.

Developing and maintaining a learning plan will give you the skills to review critically your research directions in an evidence-based manner, see the serendipitous discovery—effectively communicate it to your peers and the broader community, and find on graduation a rewarding occupation.

QUESTIONS

1 What do you want from your research experience (academic, professional and personal)?
2 In what ways could you maximise your learning and intellectual/social growth while undertaking your research program?
3 How can your supervisor/institution help you reach your goals?

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