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Incorporating the UK GRAD Programme and UKHERD

# Planning your doctorate

## Schedule for success



## Starting your doctorate

You are now starting your doctorate. We hope you will really enjoy this unique period in your life. As a postgraduate researcher you will face a new series of opportunities and pressures. Many people have gone through it before, so take the opportunity to learn from other people's experience and listen to a range of advice. The Vitae website contains advice on managing the process of your doctorate and also encourages you to think about how this period fits into your longer term career plan.

A good place to start is setting yourself some interim goals. Talk to your supervisor and work out where you want to be in a month, in six months and in a year. You can use this planner to help you record (and stick to) some of the decisions you make.



**The 'Starting your doctorate' section on the Vitae website has further information and advice. [www.vitae.ac.uk/pgr](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/pgr)**

## Supervision and key relationships

The relationship with your supervisor(s) is key to the success of your doctorate. They are your biggest ally in the completion of your doctorate. Supervisor's styles vary so it is important to talk to your supervisor about what you both expect. All doctoral researchers are expected to be proactive, independent and assertive. So if you need help it is ok to ask for it. It is best to deal with any problems as they arise.

Your supervisor is only one of your sources of support. You should aim to build a wider network around your doctoral project. Your network should typically include other postgraduate researchers, research staff, technicians, librarians, trainers, advisors and career staff.



**The 'Supervision and key relationships' section on the Vitae website has further information and advice. [www.vitae.ac.uk/pgrsupervision](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/pgrsupervision)**

## Project management

Comprehensive planning in the early months of the doctorate sets the stage for successful and timely completion. The eventual outcomes of research projects are often determined by decisions made (or not made) in the first few months. Review your plan regularly and make changes to ensure that the objectives can still be achieved. Ask your supervisor to help you think through your planning and review your progress.

**In putting together a project plan you should think about the following questions.**

- When are your deadlines?
- What else have you got to do?
- When can you start researching?
- Will any of your research take a set amount of time to complete?
- What are the main milestones in your research?
- Do you need to travel to do any of your research?
- Do you need to undertake any training?
- How long do you think writing will take you?  
Remember to leave some time for editing and correcting.

**Plot milestones onto a calendar and break down large tasks into manageable chunks. Think about what your objectives are and make sure that they are SMART.**



**The 'Managing your research project' section on the Vitae website has further information and advice. [www.vitae.ac.uk/pgresearch](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/pgresearch)**

## SMART: A tool to evaluate your objectives

For every objective ask yourself whether it meets the following SMART criteria.

- **Specific:** in both meaning and focus
- **Measurable:** so that you know when you are achieving progress and can declare success
- **Advantageous:** what's in this for you? If you can see no personal advantages, don't waste your time; you won't be seriously motivated towards success
- **Realistic:** make sure that you are being realistic – you can use your supervisor or other more experienced researchers to help you judge this
- **Time limited:** set deadlines and 'milestones', times when you will sit down to reflect on and review your progress. Use this planner to note these down

Once you have identified what you want to achieve you need to turn these objectives into a plan. Ask yourself about each objective:

- what could stop me from achieving this?
- what/who will help me to achieve this?
- when should I aim to achieve this by?

## Managing yourself

Being a postgraduate researcher can be a challenging experience. A doctorate is a long-term experience that places a lot of demands on you. You should make sure that you are looking after your health and that you maintain a work/life balance that is right for you.

Early on concentrate on building a supportive network and getting to know as many people as possible. Building a strong support network will give you more resources to draw on when your work or personal life is challenging. It is also important to talk about your expectations for your doctorate with all of your stakeholders (supervisor, partner, employer, children etc).

There is no 'one size fits all' approach to managing yourself. However, thinking about your personality and ideal working style will help you to work productively and avoid stress. The Vitae booklet 'The balanced researcher' is also a useful resource. If you do experience problems it is always good to seek help early and to be open with your supervisor about the difficulties you are experiencing.



**The 'Managing yourself' section on the Vitae website has further information and advice. [www.vitae.ac.uk/pgrmanage](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/pgrmanage)**

## Developing as a researcher

Being successful as a researcher requires you to think about your skills, objectives and the areas in which you need to develop. Make sure you include time for training in your planner. Your university may encourage, or even require, you to engage in processes such as Training Needs Analysis and Personal Development Planning. Set priorities based on your areas of weakness and what skills you require for your doctorate, life and career. How you approach your doctorate should be informed by your longer-term career aspirations. Pursuing development opportunities can be useful both as a way of thinking through what you want to do long term and as a way of developing and evidencing the skills that you will need to move forward.

The research councils have identified a number of skill areas that they think all researchers will gain through completing a doctorate. This framework (the Joint Skills Statement) is an excellent starting point for your own skills audit.



**We have turned the Joint Skills Statement into a quick self-evaluation. You can find this at [www.vitae.ac.uk/pgrdevelop](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/pgrdevelop)**

## Raising your profile

It is tempting to think that being brilliant and working hard are the only things that matter in research. However, research only becomes meaningful when you communicate it to someone else. No one builds a career by just researching. When you tell people about it at a conference or through a journal you start to articulate the implications of your research and to make a contribution to your discipline. Therefore, a successful career in research is only open to those who are able to communicate effectively.

It is in your interest as a postgraduate researcher to try and find opportunities to present your research in appropriate places, both orally, by poster and publication.

Networking is increasing the number of people you know and who know you.

By expanding the network of people you know you will be able to turn to more people for help and advice and find out about more opportunities.

Also consider presenting your research to less expert audiences. Engaging with the media and the general public is an important, if challenging, part of your role as a researcher.



**The 'Raising your profile' section on the Vitae website has further information and advice. [www.vitae.ac.uk/pgprofile](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/pgprofile)**

## Careers

What you do during your doctorate will have a major impact on your future career. It is a good idea to think about the career direction that you hope to take. Even if you feel clear about what it is that you want to do, you can still benefit from thinking about how to achieve your aims and also considering what alternatives might be available if you are not successful.

Whether your doctorate is part of a clear career strategy, an attempt to change to direction or simply seems like an interesting opportunity, you can still be doing things that will enhance your employability. During your doctorate you have the opportunity to undertake a range of activities that will provide you with useful skills and experience and enable you to explore possible career paths.

Think about how you are going to network, raise your profile, gain work-experience and expand your range of skills and experience through extra-curricular activities.



**The 'Developing your career' and 'Careers' sections on the Vitae website have further information and advice. [www.vitae.ac.uk/pgrcareers](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/pgrcareers) [www.vitae.ac.uk/careers](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/careers)**

## Vitae

**Vitae provides a range of resources and support for you, your supervisor and for other staff supporting you in your institution. Some good starting points to what is on offer include:**

- the **Vitae website** which has a dedicated section for postgraduate researchers. [www.vitae.ac.uk/pgpr](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/pgpr)
- Vitae organises a number of training and career events that you can attend (usually for free). [www.vitae.ac.uk/events](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/events)
- **'GRADBritain'**, is our online magazine written by and for postgraduate researchers. [www.vitae.ac.uk/gradbritain](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/gradbritain)
- **'PGR tips'** is our monthly email which offers tips and advice. Subscribe at [www.vitae.ac.uk/pgrtips](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/pgrtips)
- **'The balanced researcher'**, a booklet to help you tackle and juggle the many demands of research. See [www.vitae.ac.uk/pgmanage](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/pgmanage)
- **'What do researchers do?'**, assess your career options by looking at the career destinations of others. [www.vitae.ac.uk/wdrd](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/wdrd)



**For more information about Vitae, please visit [www.vitae.ac.uk](http://www.vitae.ac.uk) or email [enquiries@vitae.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@vitae.ac.uk)**

Planning a Doctorate – Schedule for Success was inspired by and adapted from The PhD Calendar, School of Graduate Studies at The University of Melbourne, developed by Stella Clark (School of Graduate Studies) and Richard James (Centre for the Study of Higher Education) (2002).

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## Starting your doctorate

### Milestones could include:

- induction(s)
- write a plan
- start/complete literature review
- meetings with your supervisor
- agreement with your supervisor on supervision process
- training needs analysis
- attend training
- write first year report
- define methodology
- begin data collection
- attend seminars, conferences
- sign up to PGR tips and GRADBritain
- family, work or other commitments
- give yourself time for a holiday!
- your own milestones.

## Midway through your doctorate

### Milestones could include:

- skills audit to identify gaps and consider how to fill these
- meet with a careers advisor to talk about your career plans
- assess research results achieved and what realistically still needs doing
- keep writing
- meetings with supervisor
- present your research at a conference or seminar
- your own milestones.

## Completing your doctorate

### Milestones could include:

- draw up a plan to cut writing up into manageable pieces
- completion of chapters or sections
- first complete draft
- apply for jobs or funding
- submit
- viva practice
- viva, corrections and graduation
- your own milestones.

## Week planner for this year:



Please use the boxes to highlight your targets and milestones


## Milestones for next year

## Milestones for year after