



# Graduate Research School

## Preparing for a Graduate Research Degree at UWA: Hints & Tips

### 1. HOW ARE GRADUATE RESEARCH PROGRAMS ORGANISED?

At UWA, the administration of most graduate research degrees and scholarships is centralised through the Graduate Research and Scholarships Office <http://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au>. However, as students are based in schools, most of the day-to-day management, allocation of resources and supervision are matters for the school.

The staff of the Graduate Research and Scholarships Office are an important source of assistance and advice for graduate research students, as are the many publications available on the Graduate Research and Scholarships Office web site. <http://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/>

Administrative staff in the Graduate Research and Scholarships Office, the Graduate Education Officers or the Manager, Graduate Research and Scholarships Office can help students with matters related to graduate research candidature or scholarships. For many students, contact is limited to matters associated with initial enrolment, allocation and administration of scholarships, submission and approval of the Research Proposal, submission of the Annual Progress Report and submission and examination of theses.

The topic of research is decided on and refined by both the student and supervisor as the student prepares a Research Proposal for submission to the Graduate Research and Scholarships Office for approval. For those students doing PhD full-time-equivalent, six months after the initial enrolment date an Annual Progress Report must be submitted to the Graduate Research and Scholarships Office. In the case of Master's, the deadline is four months. These are prepared by both the student and supervisors.

All tasks set out by Coordinators in the Research Proposal must be completed within 12 months. For full time PhD students, all tasks leading towards Confirmation of Candidature must be completed within 12 months. For further details of Confirmation of Candidature see:

<http://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/studentnet/candidature/confirmation>

### 2. HOW DOES A GRADUATE RESEARCH PROJECT DIFFER FROM HONOURS?

Short-term research projects, such as those undertaken in Honours or Postgraduate Diplomas, are essential training for graduate researchers. However, just as the transition from an undergraduate course to Honours or a Postgraduate Diploma usually requires a student to acquire and develop new skills, the transition into a graduate research degree involves a much higher level of independent thinking, planning and activity than most students expect. Most students find the transition both challenging and exciting; some find it daunting, even when they have performed well in Honours.

A graduate research degree provides a unique opportunity to follow your interest in an area of research, to focus on this for several years and make an important contribution to the development of your chosen research area. The focus is on your capacity for innovative, independent research, critical thinking, time and project management and problem-solving. You will also need to have, or to develop, excellent skills of organisation and communication of information.

### **3. IS A RESEARCH DEGREE WORTH THE EXTRA YEARS OF STUDY?**

Many high-achieving students choose to undertake a research degree because they have the drive to progress as far as they can in their chosen field. The continued challenge and enjoyment of independent research are, for many, rewards in themselves.

In addition, graduates from higher degree by research programs are highly employable, across all fields of study. You can check the statistics for your field of interest on the Gradlink web site. [www.gradlink.edu.au/gradsonline](http://www.gradlink.edu.au/gradsonline)

In some fields, such as Science, it is almost mandatory to have a Masters or PhD in order to progress. Similarly, in order to make a career in academia, a graduate research qualification is necessary. However, graduates from some fields find that there are limited employment opportunities in their particular area of interest, and that they have to look more widely.

The reason that graduates from all areas experience a high rate of success in employment is that the generic or transferable skills required for success in a graduate research degree are the same skills that are in high demand by employers. In particular, successful completion of a research degree indicates to a prospective employer that you have excellent project and personal management skills, and that you can think independently and critically, solve problems and communicate effectively. The transferable skills developed through a research degree are usually more durable, and therefore more valuable, than the content knowledge gained. For more information on the generic skills of graduate researchers at UWA see:

<http://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/supervisors/supervisors/generic-skills>

However, the decision to enter into a research degree should not be taken lightly. Undertaking an intensive two to four year project, with all that it entails, is not for everyone. It is important that prospective graduate research students inform themselves about what graduate research involves prior to making the decision. Similarly, prospective and new students should prepare carefully before commencing. This requirement is as important for those progressing from Honours in the same university as for students starting at a new university.

### **4. HOW CAN YOU PREPARE FOR A RESEARCH DEGREE?**

You should prepare by thinking, reading and talking with others about several important elements of graduate research: supervision; choosing a topic; independent research; writing a research proposal and preparing a dissertation. It is not necessary for you to remain in the school where you completed Honours. It is a good idea to investigate and consider the resources, support and supervisors available to graduate students in different schools.

## 5. SUPERVISION

Graduate research usually involves supervision of the student by two or more members of staff. External supervisors are welcome additions. Generally, allocation of supervisors is a matter for individual negotiation between student and supervisor, and students are free to choose. You should make your choice with great care, as the effectiveness of the student/supervisor relationship has a major effect on your experience.

The role of supervisors is to advise, guide and provide constructive feedback to you through the processes of choosing a realistic topic, designing a viable project, doing the research and interpreting the findings and writing the dissertation.

Things to do before deciding on supervisors:

- Read the University's *Code of Good Practice for Postgraduate Research and Supervision* <http://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/supervisors/policies/good-practice>
- Read the University's publication *Research Specialist Interests* <http://directory.uwa.edu.au/specialists/> This is a list of the research interests of UWA staff. You will find that many areas of research cross school boundaries, and there may be various possible supervisors in your area of interest in different schools.
- Read about research supervision (see "Useful Resources" below);
- Talk with some prospective supervisors about their styles of supervision and what they expect of their students;
- Talk with your prospective supervisor's current and former graduate students about their experiences; and
- Talk with prospective supervisors about their research interests and
- prospective topics.

Select supervisors whom you expect will:

- maintain an interested, professional, mutually respectful and supportive supervisory relationship with you throughout the two to four years of your project;
- meet with you regularly to discuss your research;
- provide on-going, clear, adequate, good-quality advice on the planning and execution of your research;
- provide you with timely and constructive feedback on all aspects of your work;
- guide you through the completion of your degree and into the next stage of your career.

Things to discuss and negotiate with your supervisors very early in the program:

- Your and your supervisors' preferred styles of supervision. A useful resource is the University's *Student Perceptions of Research Supervision* (SPORS) questionnaire at: <http://www.catl.uwa.edu.au/etu/spors>
- This questionnaire is designed to help students and supervisors discuss and negotiate important matters related to supervision;
- How you and your supervisors will resolve issues of intellectual property, authorship of publications and so on. For relevant information see the University's *Intellectual Property Policy* at <http://calendar.publishing.uwa.edu.au/latest/partd/intellectualpropertyregs>
- The regularity, timing and format of your meetings;

- The type and level of assistance you would like, and your supervisors are prepared to give, with respect to:
  - choosing a topic and refining the project;
  - planning a schedule; setting goals;
  - finding appropriate literature;
  - collecting the data and information;
  - analysing and interpreting your findings;
  - planning the dissertation; and writing and reviewing the dissertation;
  - a schedule for the research and preparation of the dissertation, including target deadlines for key elements of the process.

## 6. CHOOSING A TOPIC

Before deciding on a topic, it is a good idea to first identify one or more prospective supervisors according to the criteria above. Consult UWA's Research Expertise Handbook. <http://research.publishing.uwa.edu.au/research> Then, in consultation with your prospective supervisor/s, identify some possible topics and projects according to the following criteria:

- Choose an area that is interesting to you, about which you are sufficiently interested and curious to maintain your enthusiasm for two to four years;
- Choose an area that is interesting to your prospective supervisors;
- Choose a topic in which you can identify questions to be answered or gaps to be filled in the current knowledge; and
- Find a project that is realistic for you to complete within the time allocated.

### Independent Research

It is important that new research students prepare themselves by thinking about the nature of research as carefully as they think about the subject of the research. Too often, students concentrate on the content of what they are doing at the expense of the process, and realise too late that they don't really understand what is expected of them.

Think about:

- How will graduate research differ from your previous academic experience?
- What skills will you require for successful completion?
- How can you acquire the skills that you do not already have, and improve or develop those that you do have?
- What problems commonly occur during graduate research projects and how can you avoid them?

Before starting

- Read the *Terms of Candidature for Research Higher Degrees* <http://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/home/current/terms>
- Read about starting research (see the resources listed below);
- Discuss the research process with current and previous graduate students in your and other disciplines; ask them for their advice for success;
- Familiarise yourself with the resources, assistance and training available through the Library <http://www.library.uwa.edu.au/> and introduce yourself to your reference librarian;
- Familiarise yourself with the resources available for graduate students in your school and elsewhere in the University;
- Read the University's *Guidelines on Research Ethics and Research Conduct* <http://www.research.uwa.edu.au/page/16826>

- Read the University's *Guidelines for Preparing a Research Proposal*  
[http://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0016/22453/Guidelines\\_for\\_Preparing\\_Research\\_Proposals.pdf](http://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/22453/Guidelines_for_Preparing_Research_Proposals.pdf)
- See also the Graduate Research and Scholarships Offices on-line resource for writing research proposals at:  
<http://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/studentnet/proposals/format>
- Read the University's *Intellectual Property Policy*  
<http://www.universypolicies.uwa.edu.au/search?method=document&id=UP07%2F49>
- Learn to use bibliographic software such as Endnote; and
- Learn to touch type (there are various typing tutors available on-line).
- Consult the Learning, Language and Research Skills website to learn about available workshops and seminars for graduate students:  
<http://www.studentservices.uwa.edu.au/ss/learning>

## 7. PREPARING A DISSERTATION

A graduate research dissertation is not only a more comprehensive document than most students have previously prepared, but it also requires a particular style of thinking. Central to a dissertation is the thesis: *the core idea or argument*.

In the words of Anderson and Poole (1994),

*“a thesis is not the same as a topic to be investigated...while a topic may be the structure of a particular crystal or the novels of Miles Franklin, a thesis is a statement that says, for instance, something about crystals or an author's novels. The distinction is important since in many ways the statement of a thesis determines the approach and stance writers take towards their topics or research questions... a thesis is an idea or theory that is expressed as a statement, a contention for which evidence is gathered and discussed logically.”*

Thinking about the thesis should start at the very beginning of the project.

Activities to help you to start thinking about your thesis and dissertation:

- Read about writing dissertations
- Read dissertations in your and other fields to see how previous students have structured theirs (these can be found in the Scholars' Centre in the Reid Library); and
- Attend Learning Skills workshops on research and dissertation writing  
[http://www.studentservices.uwa.edu.au/ss/learning/studying\\_smarter/workshops](http://www.studentservices.uwa.edu.au/ss/learning/studying_smarter/workshops)

## 8. SOURCES OF ADVICE AND ASSISTANCE FOR GRADUATE RESEARCH STUDENTS

### Graduate Research Co-ordinators

<http://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/contact/coordinators>

### Graduate Research School

Phone: 6488 2807

Email: [pghelp@admin.uwa.edu.au](mailto:pghelp@admin.uwa.edu.au)

<http://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/contact>

**Graduate Research School (Manager)**

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<http://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/studentnet/resources/officers>

**Postgraduate Students' Association (PSA)**

All postgraduates should subscribe to the PSA email list and keep up with what is happening for postgraduate students at UWA (courses, workshops, employment opportunities, grants, interesting seminars, social activities).

<http://www.psa.guild.uwa.edu.au/>

**Guild Education Office**

Phone: 6488 2295  
[education@guild.uwa.edu.au](mailto:education@guild.uwa.edu.au)

**UWA Student Services**

Phone: 6488 2423

- Careers Centre
- Housing Service
- Financial Aid Service
- Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS)
- Medical Centre 6488 2118
- Chaplaincy
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<http://www.studentservices.uwa.edu.au/>

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