

AccessEd and Commonwealth Scholarship Commission Leaders in Sustainable Development Programme

Workshop: **Research Project Management**

Overarching workshop theme:

This training session will focus on the all-essential project management skills required for success in your degree and beyond. It will give you practical tips, tools and practice at approaches to project management, so that you leave the session with a clear plan and strategies for improving your own skills.

These sub-themes will be discussed during the training session:

- Self-audit and assessment of current project management skills
- Project management techniques
- Tools to use for time and task management
- Managing and acceptable level of 'risk' in a project or your degree
- Managing multiple stakeholders and your supervisory relationship during your degree
- Confidence in strategic planning

Session pre-work

Bring an example of one personal project where something has gone wrong or failed. This can be a project related to your degree, or a different project altogether (work related, personal life related).

Be prepared to discuss this example with other attendees, reflecting on *what* happened, *why* you think it happened, and *the impact* on your intended outcome.

We will be sharing our experiences without judgement and as a learning opportunity.

Project situation	
What happened?	
Why do you think this happened?	
What was the impact on your intended outcomes?	
What would you do differently next time?	

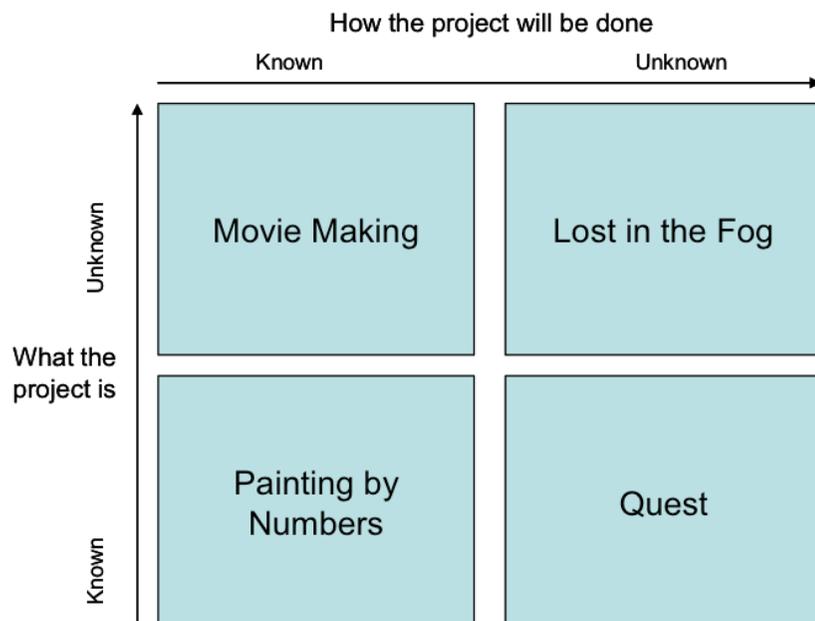
Session pre-reading

Read the following opinion piece on project management. Think about your own degree. How can you apply these experiences to your own degree?

"Long before I threw caution to the wind and began my part-time PhD my Professor gave me a very wise piece of advice *"Don't be afraid of a PhD, it's really just a project"*. Now that I am entering the 3rd year of my part-time PhD I want to reflect on the similarities between a PhD and a project and offer some tips on how to use the tools and techniques of project management to make sustained progress in a research degree.

It's okay to feel "Lost in the Fog"

One project management professor, author and speaker helpfully classifies the vast and diverse landscape of projects into 4 basic project types, depending on how clear we are what is to be done in the project, and how clear we are over how to do it. His 2*2 matrix is shown below:



Projects where both the "what" and the "how" of the project are well-articulated are called "Painting by Numbers". Projects where the "what" is clear but the "how it will be achieved" is not are known as "Quests". Conversely projects where the "how" is well understood, but the "what" is unclear are labelled "Movie Making".

The fourth and final type of project is "Lost in the Fog". These rather scary sounding projects are rarer beasts in the corporate and academic world, and involve an organisation undertaking a radically new activity, or pursuing a new strategy. Obeng argues that the *"secret of success in these projects is to proceed very carefully, to proceed one step at a time"*.

...continued

It strikes me that, at least in the early days, most research degree are akin to “Lost in the Fog” projects. Indeed, I have experienced many moments when I felt utterly adrift in my research, unable to articulate what I am trying to achieve or how I am going to go about it. My supervisors and academic colleagues reassure me that this is completely normal in a PhD. At such times the only thing to do is to keep working. Keep reading, thinking, talking – just keep going – sometimes for weeks or months at a time.

Happily in most cases the fog does not persist indefinitely; it eventually tends to disperse and just like larger projects the researcher will gradually mutate from a “Lost in the Fog” type to a more optimistically sounding “Quest” as you start to define the research questions and explore the different methodological approaches at your disposal. The latter stages of a PhD will hopefully be closer in form to a “Movie Making” project where the methodological approach is agreed, and you know what to do to get to the finishing line of thesis submission, even if the final shape of the finished thesis remains something of a mystery – often until the few weeks preceding submission.

Have a plan – even it only stretches out over the next six months and changes frequently.

Some people are planners and some are not. It all goes back to our personality type according to [Myers Briggs](#). I out myself now as a planner – with “to-do” lists and plans an essential part of my professional and personal life. However even if you are not a natural planner I would argue that there are a number of benefits of maintaining some form of plan of work for at least the next stage (say 6 months) of your research.

- Firstly the discipline of drawing up a plan forces you to think about what you need to do and in what order it makes sense to do things. This in itself is a good discipline for any research project, and thus an important skill for an apprentice researcher to learn
- Secondly a plan breaks the PhD into more manageable chunks. As the first South African summiteer of Everest said of climbing the mountain *“focusing on the far off summit makes it seem impossible. Looking back at progress & taking one step at a time makes it possible.”* Your plan provides your steps up the imposing mountain of the PhD. The satisfaction of ticking off completed tasks in the plan provides a look back at the progress you are making.

- **Thirdly a documented plan of work will inspire confidence from your supervisory team** – and this confidence will increase exponentially once you start to deliver what you said you would deliver on the plan. Yes, the direction of the degree may change and the order and scope of the tasks on the plan may be quite fluid, but at least then you are changing direction from a known baseline rather than arbitrarily.
- **Fourthly and finally a plan is a comforting presence** – it reminds and reassures us that we are moving forward with some sense of direction, rather than adrift at the mercy of the winds of anxiety, or what our fellow students think we should do next. Even if you are very much in the “lost in the fog” stage of any research degree, there will be a number of productive tasks that will enable you to navigate through the fog (e.g. literature reviews, talking to other researchers, mind- mapping potential research questions etc.)