

7 Points to Creating an Excel Research Degree Project Management Chart

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1. Learning the skills of time management is a critical element of graduate research training. However, from the perspective of a student, a seemingly open-ended program of several years of research appears to provide ample time to complete a research degree – this is not a valid assumption. Research degrees are time limited by universities, and for every day that a research student exceeds the allotted time, there are financial and career penalties to be considered.
2. Managing research degree time involves mapping out the entire period available and then *backward-scheduling* all activities from the nominal end date.
3. A basic Excel template for managing graduate degree research can be downloaded from www.doctortee.net/graduateresearch.html. Students can modify the chart to suit their specific requirements.
4. The columns of the chart represent units of time – for practical purposes, the minimum time unit should be a week. The rows of the chart represent activities that need to be completed in order to undertake research and submit a thesis for examination. In the template chart a sample period of 156 weeks has been allotted through to submission of a final thesis/dissertation.
5. Research students need to identify key milestones for their research along the timeline, including thesis and research paper writing. They also need to identify which activities need to be undertaken concurrently.
6. Although the project management chart is generally developed at the commencement of a degree when there are still various unknowns, the end date is fixed and, based upon this, important milestones need to be set in place and assiduously worked towards.
7. A professional approach to project management requires that milestones are treated as immovable – particularly since the end date is immovable. If it appears that a date may lapse without the milestone met, then students need to increase resources (i.e., daily/weekly work hours) to ensure that it does not lapse. This self-imposed discipline is an important professional skill that needs to be mastered. Without it, there is no sense of urgency and, what should be a professional and systematic process of investigation, ends up becoming an aimless and meandering exploration of thought bubbles rather than research.