



Planning Your (Ideal) PhD

Increasingly, PhDs are planned, and project managed. Certainly, in Australia anyway.

So, what is the ideal PhD plan? I'm not entirely sure, but here is my stab at it.

Firstly, I think there are several plans, not one. And I think each is no longer than a page. Together, your entire plan might be many pages. But you (mostly) only ever review one of those plans at a time.

Here I'll be working from the macro (years) to the micro (days).

Things to note:

1. This is not prescriptive, just an idea from a guy who did a PhD and helps PhD students and graduates.
2. Australia has a PhD program that is largely devoid of coursework.
3. PhDs are largely limited to 3 years (fulltime equivalent, FTE) with some possibility of going to 4 years (FTE). But anything longer is increasingly unlikely.
4. PhDs in Australia are funded positions for most candidates. This means there are zero tuition costs. Some programs come with stipends (tax free income for students). Some programs might include funding for research, but in most cases the larger group or team you are part of will be expected to fund the costs of research or candidates will have to find funding.

PhD program

Year 1

- Literature review.
- Developing research skills fundamental to on-going data collection, analysis, and reporting. E.g., learning and practicing the skills required to collect data, record experiments, store samples, manage your databases, write reports, analyse data, make inferences about what experiments to perform next, problem solve experimental design and conduct.
- Data collection for your research. Probably aim 1. But could be any part of your project.

Year 2

- Large part of data collection for all aims. Either consecutively or simultaneously.
- Writing up your experiments in such a way that enables easy final write up in your thesis or a publication.
- Drafting your thesis.

Year 3

- Final touches on data collection, analysis, and reporting.
- Writing your thesis.

Year 4 (if required)

- Writing your thesis.

Yearly

Break the year down into usable chunks. Quarters works for me. That means 4 x 12 week *sprints*, and 4 x 1 week breaks. Of course, you could plan to take your leave all together or however you like.

If working in 12 weeks sprints consider:

- 10 weeks data collection, collation, and recording (in your research notebook).
- 1 - 2 days reviewing the last 10 weeks.
- 1 - 2 days planning the next 10 weeks.
- 1 week writing things up in more detail. Making data/reports look pretty, expressed scientifically; contextualised/placed within the literature; creating a relevant slide for a presentation.
- 1 – 2 days off (in addition to the weekend).

Using the above model will give you 4 weeks leave in the year AS WELL AS 1-2 days off every 12 weeks. The latter is particularly important. Due to the workplace agreement between universities and the relevant union, the second half of the calendar year is void of public holidays.

Monthly

Consider what might be happening in your team and around you. Things that might impact your ability to conduct research. Things that might impact access to your supervisor. Things that might impact the mood of the academics around you. These things aren't excuses to do less or avoid challenges, but they are things that can help you better respond.

The two major sources of research funding in Australia are the Australian Research Council, and the National Health and Medical Research Council. Check their websites for due dates to get an idea for when things might get stressful.

Semester dates are easy to find for your uni. Note them.

If your data collection involves people or places other than yourself, think about the busy periods for those people, and places. Do a web search to find better or worse times to engage them.

If your data collection involves access to equipment that is shared across your faculty, university, state, country or the world, see when access is high or low. Or how access is granted (e.g., through a merit-, peer review-, or calendar-based allocation process). Note those times and plan accordingly.

What are the public holidays or relevant religious celebrations you or your host institution observe? Note them.

Are there birthdays, weddings or other celebrations within your personal life that need to be accounted for? E.g., I take my birthday off as well as that of my partner and kids.

Here are some ideas to consider for each month of the year.

- **Jan** – Be careful not to slack off in this month. Lots of academics take time off and write grants. So they tend to spend more time off-site. As students, it can be easy to do nothing. Yet, you might find there is opportunity to get access to equipment and reagents that are heavily booked at other times of the year.
- **Feb** – Most academics back *on site*. Some stress might be evident due to grant outcome or progress.

- **Mar** – Grant schemes often report outcomes here. It can be a very stressful time for academics. Students come onto campus. Transport to and from campus is a nightmare. You might even take on some tutoring/sessional teaching.
- **Apr** – Camps settles into a groove. Supervisors might get busy with teaching load. Easter break.
- **May** – Supervisors might get busier with teaching and assessment. Some grant schemes have their due dates in May.
- **Jun** – Northern hemisphere summer. Lots of international conferences. Supervisors might head overseas. Exams for undergraduates. Followed by mid-year break.
- **Jul** – Northern hemisphere summer. Lots of international conferences. Supervisors might head overseas. More grant announcements happen in Jul too.
- **Aug** – Northern hemisphere summer. Lots of international conferences. Supervisors might head overseas.
- **Sep** – Supervisors return and could be “demanding” results.
- **Oct** – Supervisors might get busy with teaching load.
- **Nov** – Supervisors might get busier with teaching and assessment. Semester ends for undergraduates.
- **Dec** – Crazy month ‘cos everyone wants stuff done “by the end of the year”. Then the whole places close for nearly 2 weeks...Christmas parties for the university, faculty, school, department, institute, and research team. Not to mention something for your professional body, and the student cohort.

Weekly

- Reflect on what days you work well, and what days are poor for you. For example, I play soccer on Sundays. So, I am usually physically drained Mondays. I try to avoid detailed thinking tasks Mondays. Generally, I get a good night’s sleep Tuesdays and Thursdays. So, I tend to get lots done Wednesdays and Fridays. Those days I tend to schedule the thinking work as well as the client/customer outreach.
- What is your teaching schedule?
- When are you expected to attend regular meetings (e.g., team meetings, supervisory meetings, departmental, seminars, etc.).
- Definitely take two days off every seven – i.e., have a weekend.
- Definitely limit your daily work to set times as much as possible. That might mean 9 – 5 Monday to Friday. Or it could be 8 – 6 Monday to Friday. Or even 10 – 7 Tuesday to Saturday. Or perhaps 9 – 6 Monday to Wednesday, and 10 – 7 Friday and Saturday. Communicate that intent to your supervisor, especially if the hours are not something that looks like 9 – 5 Monday to Friday.

Structured weeks help deal with periods of low motivation. If you know what needs to be done and/or know what happens next, it is MUCH easier to do make progress WITHOUT having motivation.

Dr Richard Huysmans is the author of [Connect the Docs: A Guide to getting industry partners for academics](#). He specialises in delivering high quality strategic advice to the education, research, and government sectors. He is driven by the challenge of helping researchers be commercially smart, making academic ideas practical; the art of the #pracademic. Richard’s clients appreciate his cut-through approach. He knows the sector and how to turn ideas into reality.

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