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Thesis overview & outline template

A separate Word document comprising the actual template is available to be directly edited by students. This document explains the philosophy behind the Template and how it can be used effectively. Some examples of real students at different stages in their candidature are also available on request.

Purpose of the Thesis Overview and Outline Template

The Thesis Overview and Outline Template is a *process tool for facilitating communication between supervisor and student*. Its purposes are twofold:

(i) For supervisors, especially those with several students, it is a good way to assist in remembering where each student is up to exactly. As a working document (which changes over time), it is a record of the current state of understanding of what the research is about. It contains the necessary information for a supervisor to click right back into the last discussion with each student. From a supervisor's perspective, this is helpful when there are a number of students being supervised.

(ii) For students, it is a document that assists in the process of formulating the research and in structuring and writing the thesis. It is also a way of getting more value out of meetings with supervisors.

The most important thing to note about the template is that it is a working document that changes over time and that it has value for the whole length of a PhD, from the very beginning when the first supervision meetings are held through to when the thesis is submitted. As a communication tool, it is something that should be on hand at every supervision meeting, and as a working document it should be reviewed regularly. Use of the template and the accompanying communication process makes the process of developing and finishing a thesis much easier.

Stages in a PhD and the components of the Thesis Overview and Outline Template

There are three parts to the template: (1) an overview that assists in framing the research; (2) a mechanism to track progress; and (3) a thesis outline that assists in structuring the thesis.

At the beginning of a PhD, the focus of attention should be the Overview. This is a discussion tool to enable the supervisor to effectively mentor the student in the development of the research proposal. The supervisor and student consider the answers to various questions to ensure there is sufficient consistency. When it "all adds up", this is a strong indicator of success for the project. When things don't gel, then there needs to be more discussion and/or reflection on the topic. Below, the thinking relating to each question in the template is discussed. Note that much of the information from the overview can be used in the thesis outline, and ultimately in the thesis.

When the overview has internal consistency and the various elements are sound, and there is agreement between student and supervisor, the focus of attention should turn to the thesis outline. This is a working document that develops over time. The first stage is for the student to put in their intended chapter headings and perhaps a brief paragraph per chapter about the type of content that will appear in each chapter. The second stage, which may take several months, is to develop the paragraph statement about each chapter into a coherent dotpoint outline of that chapter. This takes quite some time, and should be done chapter by chapter. It is quite acceptable that it is rough/vague at first, although over time it needs to become tight. The premise is that it is better to have a roadmap for where you are going before you set out

on the journey. The third stage occurs as you write each chapter, as the thesis outline may need revisiting/reviewing.

The mechanism for tracking progress is a simple table with a star rating system and a wordcount. When this is compared, say at three monthly intervals, it provides positive feedback of progress. This can be important especially during the writing phase. Also included is a space with a heading that encourages a logging of major decisions about the thesis. Much time can be wasted over a candidature by rehashing old discussions for no reason. Sometimes, of course, it is good to go over old ground, but it should not be done simply because nobody recorded a decision. For this reason, I encourage all PhD students to write after each supervision meeting a short “notes on outcomes and actions” and to email it back to their supervisor.

Endorsements from students

Lain Dare, PhD student

Professor Vanclay's Thesis Outline has been an essential tool for the structuring and ongoing management of my research project. I have not only used this outline for supervision reporting but also as a guide and 'notebook' for my research, documenting ideas to further research, questions to answer and points of reference. Having such information in the one place has not only allowed me to capture it effectively, but also ensured that my supervisors can see and comment on where I am going, its relevance and what I should focus on next. I am sure this helps us all work together as a team to get the most out of the research and out of each other as research colleagues.

Anna Gralton, PhD student

The Thesis Overview and Outline (TOO) tool greatly assisted my communication with my supervisor, and the overall organisation and management of my PhD project. In my experience, the TOO tool facilitated a more efficient communication, as my supervisor was able to rapidly reacquaint himself with my project and the progress that had been made since our last meeting. This was extremely important in my situation as my supervisor had a significant case load (i.e. other students and an international profile). The use of the TOO tool also meant that we could spend more time discussing the nitty gritty of the project or debating certain aspects, as opposed to wasting time on repositioning the study all over again. As a planning device, the TOO tool was also very helpful for me because it offered an instrument for cross-checking time and activity milestones. Perhaps the most obvious benefit of the TOO tool, however, is that it clearly structures and contributes to your actual thesis, and, with the support of your supervisor, gives you the confidence to move forward knowing that you are on the right track.

Peat Leith, PhD student

The thesis outline has been of great use to me in structuring my work and time and it is something that I will adapt to all manner of research activities throughout my career. It provides a very useful template for building up arguments and ideas into a coherent form and is useful also to review progress and where one is going off track. As a working document it is useful to be able to review older versions and see where changes have been made and thus remember the shifting rationalisations of a PhD thesis over its course. In my meetings with co-supervisors, the outline of the thesis, the thesis questions, the structure of chapters and the condensed versions of their arguments have been a very useful point to which we have returned over and over again to assess how the project was tracking. That role of the 'outline' in providing a mediation point between supervisor and student is a critical one because, from an early stage it gives the thesis an agreed form, albeit one that is evolving. For myself, as a candidate, it was also a very important grounding influence. When everything seemed too much and too difficult, I often found myself returning to the basic argument of a chapter and thesis in the outline which could make the troubling moment seem less substantial because it could be viewed from within the broader picture of my thesis, my discipline and my life.

Ana Maria Esteves, PhD student (University of Melbourne)

I came across the Thesis Overview & Outline Template in the final year of my PhD, undertaken through another university. I was at a stage when the data appeared amorphous and I was uncertain as to which line of argument to follow and what the contribution of my research, and the end-point, looked like. The value of the tool cannot be understated – it helped structure my thinking, systematically identify the gaps and affirm the contribution. I have no doubts that without a thesis plan it would have taken me longer to submit.

Explanation of the thinking behind the questions in the Research Overview

The **Student's name** needs to be in big lettering on the top right hand side so that the document can be easily found in the file along with the other students.

The **Student's University ID number** is needed so that it is available should the supervisor ever have to complete a form relating to the student. Almost every University form relating to a student needs the Student ID number. By including it here, it is in a place that is readily available to the supervisor.

The **contact phone numbers** are needed again as a matter of convenience for the supervisor. Having them here just makes it easier than looking up other databases.

The **version date** is really important because this is a working document that changes frequently. A supervisor (and a student) needs to be sure that they are looking at the most recent version. For this reason, it is important that the version date is typed in afresh each time, and is not done using Word's auto date facility. If you use the auto date facility, the date changes when the supervisor opens the document or prints it. It must be the correct date as per when the version was written, not when the supervisor looks at it.

By the same token, I strongly encourage the use of a specific **naming convention**. I suggest that the file be named: <Thesis Outline Studentsurname YYYYMMDD.doc>. The reason for using the (what might at first appear unusual) YYYYMMDD format is that it produces date-ordered lists when doing an alphabetical sort. Other naming conventions create confusion about which version is most current. Using this naming convention is good practice for all documents relating to the thesis. Version confusion is very frustrating and can lead to a lot of wasted time.

The general **Topic** of the thesis and the specific **Title** are listed first in the Overview because it is obvious to start with what the thesis is about. However, deciding on a specific title can be hard and may not occur until sometime into the research. Rather than getting bogged down with a specific title, I encourage students to start with a general statement of what the research is about. The title can come later, and might very well change several times during the candidature. I also suggest that the general topic is what is used on the student's enrollment so that the university records don't have to be changed every time there is a change of thesis topic. I tend to suggest that students use meaningful titles rather than esoteric ones.

Passion and future **Positioning** are included to get a sense of where the PhD (both as a qualification and as a topic of study) fits into the life trajectory of the student. If there is no fit, the student and supervisor need to talk about why the student is doing the PhD. If the student has no idea about their passion or what they want to do, perhaps they should be encouraged to do some personal development courses. If the passion and positioning are substantially different to the topic of the PhD, perhaps there should be a discussion around changing the topic. I believe that it is important for the supervisor to know the student's passion and positioning so that when there is a crisis in the PhD (which invariably happens at some time or another for most students) the supervisor can counsel the student and restore their confidence by reminding them why they are doing the PhD.

In addition to passion and positioning, the personal and professional **aims** (and objectives) in doing a PhD should be listed. This might help the supervisor identify particular opportunities that might benefit the student. It might also be an easier way of including all the things that a student wants to say about themselves that are relevant to their doing a PhD.

One of the things that might be hard to do, and it is OK to leave blank at first or if you don't want to do this, is to be able to write a short statement about your personal purpose, or a **Personal Mission**. This can be done by drawing on your passion, positioning and personal aims. There are times, such as applying for a job, when it might be useful having a personal mission statement to recite.

One of the big decisions in the early stages of a PhD is consideration what **discipline** the thesis is in. For some students, this might be straightforward or obvious, but for many students doing anything that is remotely cross-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary and/or trans-disciplinary research, this is a major issue. Discipline here doesn't necessarily mean a macro-level discipline like sociology or geography (although it could), what is implied here is the subdiscipline (or discourse) in which the student will claim proficiency at the end of the thesis. Identifying the body of scholarship to which they seek to belong to is important for two reasons. Firstly, it has a large bearing on who the examiners should be. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it assists in locating the student in a field and defining the literature with which they need to connect. It also creates an identity for the student, and perhaps indicates what professional associations they should join, conferences they should go to, and what journals they should browse. Note that sometimes decisions about the discipline might change over the course of a PhD as a student takes a different direction than was intended or expected at the beginning.

In addition to the (sub)discipline, the Research Outline also asks about **relevant discourses**. Especially in interdisciplinary projects, this refers to all the areas of literature that are relevant to the topic and that should be included in the literature review. This is a list that typically changes over the course of the discussions. It starts by deconstructing the topic and title, but it can also utilize the information in the student's passion and positioning statements. It also comes from deconstructing the research questions. Because in some cases there can be many topics that get listed, I encourage a division into those that are regarded as being primary discourses and those of only secondary importance. In the beginning, this should be an open, unconstrained brainstorming process, but over time it should be narrowed down or focused in order to be more manageable.

Universities have different rules about **examiner** selection and whether or not students have a formal role or not in that process. It is a good idea to be clear about your university's rules on this matter. Irrespective of the rules, however, it is a good idea for both supervisor and student to think about examiners early on. In the very beginning, the statement here should be of the type of examiner (in terms of disciplinary location), but over time it may become a more specific statement. Knowing what discipline the thesis is in, and what the primary discourses are, is a good way of thinking about who the examiners might be. Examiners can also be chosen on the basis of: (i) who will be able to relate to the thesis conceptually – ie they should be sympathetic (at least not hostile) towards your theoretical approach and/or methodology; (ii) who needs to read your work because of their role; (iii) who you want to read your work in order that you might influence them; and finally (iv) who you might want as your champion. Of course, it is always a good idea to ensure that any potential examiner is well cited in the thesis, but don't overdo it either!

Because very few people actually read theses, if you are to achieve your mission (objectives) it is usually the case that you want to produce some publications and/or other outputs. Thinking about the **audiences for these outputs** helps to develop a publication plan, but it also helps in ensuring consistency of the overall thesis overview.

It is one thing to have a topic or even a title, but they often don't mean a lot on their own. Very early in the thesis process, some sort of description, summary, synopsis or précis is required and eventually an **abstract** of the thesis is needed. Writing a good abstract is difficult, especially early on. At the same time however, a description of the research is needed for many reasons. As a process of developing the thesis, there are several components that make up a good abstract:

- (a) something about the problem context that makes the project worthwhile;
- (b) having an idea about what you are likely to find (and eventually did find), ie some hypotheses and/or perhaps some recommendations;
- (c) outlining the methodology to be used;
- (d) stating the theoretical framework to be used;
- (e) and, of course, stating the research question.

All of these things need to be spelled out in the thesis and therefore are included in the Thesis Overview and Outline Template.

The **problem context** refers to the background issue or underlying problem that justifies why the intended research needs to be done. What makes this issue worth studying?

Before the methodology and/or theoretical framework can be specified, the **Research Question** needs to be identified. Identifying the research question is a long process. While it is easy to get some words, these words need to be perfected over time. A student should be able to easily remember the wording of their research question. To enable the development of an effective primary or macro research questions, a series of subordinate research questions can also be conceived.

Developing **hypotheses** early on is a good idea to provide a sense of where the research is headed. Note that it is not intended that you be closed to alternative hypotheses, however it is intended that you can reflect on whether your methodology will be adequate to prove what you would like it to prove. It is also a good idea to check that there is consistency between the intended hypotheses and the research question.

Recommendations are different to hypotheses, in that hypotheses are statements of anticipated findings, whereas recommendations in this context are notional draft prescriptions that you might suggest that arise from your findings. While not necessarily applicable to all PhDs, to those doing applied research or which involve an industry partner, keeping a track of recommendations when you think of them is a good idea. The space here is a space where you can park stuff to digest later.

Supervisors are not always experts in the same precise field as their students. Students may dabble in peripheral areas and may like to introduce concepts that might be new. One area of misunderstanding between student and supervisor can be over the precise meaning of **Key Terms**. Students too may find that terms and concepts are not always used consistently. Space is provided in the Research Outline for all Key Terms and concepts to be listed, with the suggestion that definitions for these terms be found. Certainly, any term central to the thesis that is unfamiliar to supervisor and/or student should be defined and a favourite definition for any term that is controversial in the literature should be provided.

When the research question is identified (even if not perfected), attention should be focussed on the developing the **Methodology**. This can take several meetings. Having a clear idea of the methodology of course is one of the important early steps in the research. It needs to be done before a Research Proposal can be submitted to the University for confirmation and of course before Ethics Approval can be sought. Being clear about the research questions is important, but reflecting on the methodology to ensure that it does actually answer the questions is equally important.

At some point, and for some disciplines but not all, making a statement about the **Theoretical Framework** that underpins the approach to be taken in the thesis may be important. This may be hard to do at first unless you come to the PhD with a very clear idea about this. An understanding of what theoretical framework to take is likely to develop as you work through the literature. In some disciplines, this issue may not be meaningful at all. It would be good to discuss whether or not you need a defined theoretical framework with your supervisor.

A key feature of the Research Overview is that everything is iterative. The whole thing is subject to change. Each item connects with the other items. Discussion between supervisor and student needs to go round and round until there is not only completion of each section, but more importantly a degree of consistency and coherence to the Overview as a whole.

Typically it takes about the first three months of full time candidature before the Research Overview can be completed adequately. When the Research Overview is complete, attention can go toward completing the publication plan and the Thesis Outline. Information in the Research Overview and Thesis Outline can also be used in the Preliminary Research Proposal needed for confirmation and for gaining Ethics Committee approval.

Publication Plan

The publication plan is an agreed strategy between student and supervisor about what publications might come out of the thesis. It is good to conceive of the publications early. It is also good to have a clear understanding of expectations about authorship. There is also a possibility to devise a thesis around publications. Different universities have varying rules about this. Having a discussion about writing a conventional thesis versus preparing a set of publications is a good idea.

Thesis Outline

As indicated on page 1 of this explanation, when the Research Overview has internal consistency and the various elements are sound, and there is agreement between student and supervisor, the focus of attention should turn to the Thesis Outline. Like the Overview, the Thesis Outline is a working document that develops over time. However, developing the Thesis Outline is relatively easy to do as most of the hard work in developing the concept of the PhD has been done in preparing the Overview. A good Research Overview makes the rest of the thesis easy.

The first step is for the student to insert their intended chapter headings in place of the generic headings and perhaps to write a brief paragraph about the type of content that will appear in each chapter. The second stage is to develop this paragraph statement about each chapter into a coherent dotpoint outline of that chapter. This takes quite some time, and should be done chapter by chapter. It is quite acceptable that it is rough/vague at first, although over time it needs to become tight.

Finally, the student progresses to writing the thesis. Writing the thesis should begin early in the candidature, not left to the last year. Writing is made much easier by having the Thesis Outline. Note that much of the work in writing the thesis, and in developing the outline, has already been done in the development of the Research Overview.

The **Abstract** has already been written, but will need revision at several points in time.

The **Introduction** is an overview of the whole thesis, but it will draw on the Problem Context.

The **Literature Review** will need to include the various discourses that were identified.

The **Methodology** has been outlined in the Research Overview and will just need to be expanded for the thesis and changed from an intention to what actually occurred.

The **Results** and **Discussion** will need to be written after you have obtained some results.

If all goes according to plan, the **Conclusion** can utilize much of your expectations about findings (hypotheses) and the various recommendations you conceived of along the way.

Note that if a thesis by publication is proposed, the benefit of having a Thesis Outline is perhaps less, but there is still great value in working through the Research Overview.

Feedback

I trust that the template and these comments will be useful to you. I wish you the best in your supervision and/or studies as the case may be. I invite your feedback on this document.

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