How to successfully complete my Master’s and/or PhD studies  
9 June 2009  
Prof Jan Kroeze  
Professor (Research): School of IT

Choose a topic that you are interested in

- You must have a passion for your work  
- A good topic may be related to what you do at your everyday job  
- You could use an aspect/project of your job as a case study  
- Get permission from your boss – this will impress her because it sends a signal that you are serious about what you do  
- Or if you are bored with your job, choose something else that could eventually lead to a more satisfying job  
- Talk to colleagues and friends, even if they do not understand the jargon of your field – this forces one to formulate and clarify your ideas
Read (a) good book(s) on research before you start


Spend time to write a solid proposal

- A good proposal takes you almost half-way
- Read enough to make sure that your idea is acceptable and has not yet been done by someone else
- But do not try to read everything that has been published
- It is only a plan which can be changed if necessary during the study; of course, in consultation with your supervisor
- Elements: introduction, background, problem statement, main research question and sub-questions, hypothesis, aims, philosophy, approach, strategy, data generation methods, contribution, short literature review, study schedule
- Ensure that you address one single, focused issue
- Your problem statement, main question, hypothesis should say the same thing, but formulated from a different angle
- Present your proposal at a colloquium and follow the procedures for title registration and ethics applications, appointment of internal and external examiners
Plan properly – and stick to it!

- Plan realistically
- Adopt your plan if necessary but do not put it aside
- Communicate progress and any changes with your supervisor
- Submit chapter by chapter
- Do not try to do too much in one study – focus on one central aspect
- You can do the rest for postdoctoral research
- Read and sign a memorandum of understanding between student and supervisor – MoU currently being compiled by ES&IT

Consider the article route

- Time is too precious to waste four years or more on thesis writing before you start publishing
- Qualifications AND research outputs are important for promotion and NRF rating
- Your data and literature review will not get outdated before you submit your research for publication
- Quality control – peer reviews – also ensures that you are on the right track; examiners should take this into account during final evaluation
- Plan differently
  - Structure differently: 3 to 5 papers/articles each with its own problem statement, literature review, methodology, results, etc.
  - Version control could be complex: paper (various submissions), article (various submissions), chapter
- Make take a little bit longer to complete, but you will have more and better outputs
Submit paper proposals to conferences

- This forces one to get something on paper at a target date, even if it is first draft of your “chapter” or only a slide show
- Preferably, choose a conference with peer reviewing and published proceedings
- But even a conference that accept papers on abstracts only will get you going
- Reading a paper makes one part of the community of researchers sharing similar interests
- Feedback can be used to improve your chapter
- You will meet people that you can talk to and ask for advice
- “Research prospers through interaction” – Prof Dewald Roode
- The paper can be extended into an article for an accredited journal – submit a short version for the conference – do not say everything that you know
- This way you will get three outputs: paper, article, chapter!

Publish with your supervisor

- If you do the writing your name comes first and your supervisor’s second
- If the supervisor has to rewrite you chapter her name comes first
- You may even co-author with other colleagues and still use the paper as part of your thesis
- Be open and clear about what your contribution was (footnote at beginning of chapter)
- This will also make your supervisor more responsible about the project (bonus)
Make time every day/week to work

- Use the best two hours of each day (25%)
- Or use one day per week (20%)
- Some departments expect staff to spend 40% of their time on research
- Switch off your email during that time
- Do not answer your phone
- Keep the internet off, unless you need to search for literature
- “A page a day” works for some people
- Apply for study leave: draft one chapter per month
- Do the finishing touches later
- BOS principle: bum on seat...

Read a lot, but not too much

- Reading can become an excuse for writer’s block
- Start building your bibliography right from the start
- Makes notes and references in the correct format right from the start
- Once you have written a first draft, you will know where the gaps are so that you could search for specific material to add and integrate
- Read before and after you do you empirical work
- Integrate insights from literature with empirical results in a separate section or in the conclusion
- The literature review and empirical research are not two separate studies
Work in cycles

- Do not try to get one chapter perfect before moving on
- Keep working on the next chapter while you wait for feedback
- Once you have completed one cycle you will have a much better idea of direction, limitations, feasibility, etc.
- This will also help your supervisor to have a better understanding of your ideas – ensures better supervision
- One can be very emotional when you get feedback and it is good to give it some time before reworking – you will be more objective and able to differentiate between good and bad/irrelevant advice
- You may challenge your supervisor’s advice if you do not agree, but make sure that you have enough backing (arguments, data, literature)

Apply for funds to fast-track your study

- Use bursary money and additional funds wisely
- Language editing
- Copying and binding
- Budget for expenses: travelling costs, questionnaires, etc.
- Conference registration, accommodation, travelling
- Page fees for publication (usually paid by university)
- Research assistant
- Maybe you could even appoint a marking assistant to free some time
Let you supervisor know that you want to complete and submit

- At least three months before submission
- Your supervisor needs to identify and appoint/confirm suitable external examiners
- This will give a signal that you are ready to finish
- This will force her to give an indication if she thinks whether you are ready to submit or not

21 ways to substantially increase your chance of failure (Hofstee, 2006: 216-217)

1. Rely on someone other than yourself to control the dissertation process
2. Aim high – way high: plan to redefine the field with your work
3. Don’t plan your dissertation project or make timelines
4. Choose a nice broad topic
5. Don’t have a problem to tackle, or at least not one that you can come to some conclusion about
6. Don’t make a thesis statement about your problem
7. If you make a thesis statement, be sure not to delineate it
21 ways to substantially increase your chance of failure (Hofstee, 2006: 216-217)

8. Write a vague proposal and get it passed
9. Research the secondary literature for ever
10. Just get the primary data any old way
11. Tell your supervisor that s/he is wrong – do this often and with conviction
12. Let your method take care of itself
14. Don’t reference or quote other scholars. If you do, do it seldom and make sure their work is out of date.

21 ways to substantially increase your chance of failure (Hofstee, 2006: 216-217)

15. Include lots of irrelevant or marginally relevant material; more is better after all
16. Also good – wait for someone to come with that information that you need to do your dissertation
17. Make sure that every sentence you write is perfect – the first time round
18. Don’t come to a conclusion or, if you do, make sure it has very little to do with what you started out to investigate
19. Ignore institutional guidelines – they have nothing to do with the quality of your work
21 ways to substantially increase your chance of failure (Hofstee, 2006: 216-217)

20. Don’t let your supervisor know how far you are or what you are doing. NEVER hand in drafts for comments
21. Don’t edit. You wrote it all down, what more could they want?

THANK YOU