Research Tips

How do I get started?

The Research Topic

Finding a suitable research topic or field should be your starting point, although this can also be the most difficult part of commencing research, as it requires a consideration of a number of questions, including:

- Interest and benefit: will you enjoy the topic? Will it assist you in developing expertise in an appropriate area? Will it support your long-term career goals? Will it give you a profile?
- Open-mindedness: Will you undertake the research on your own or with collaborators? Who can be your potential collaborators?
- Significance and innovation: does it address an important issue?
- Viability: what resource requirements, support, and expertise will you need to undertake the research? Will your background enable you to undertake the work?
- Time commitments: how will you fit the work in with your teaching load? Could teaching be the starting point for your research?
- Contextualisation: do you understand the University’s research directions, as this will assist you in contextualising your work within the overall strategy of the University.

Research Plan

Once you have fleshed out an idea for a research topic, you will need to turn your mind to a Research Plan. The Research Plan is an essential tool for enabling you to develop your topic into an actual project. The plan should describe your proposed idea for research, its significance, and how the project will be conducted. It should outline the specific goals of your research proposal, any background information available, research design and methods, and timeline. The plan should also take into account and articulate ideas for interaction and/or collaboration (e.g. with mentors, peers, external partners) and dissemination of research findings.

Support

The delivery of a research project and the long-term development of staff into active researchers often hinges upon the support they are provided. It is therefore important for you to consider the various forms of support – including intellectual, emotional, and practical - necessary and available.
• Faculty support

Understanding your faculty’s research direction and support available will help you in the preparation of your research project. A valuable source of information will be your senior colleagues, including the Associate Dean of Research, as they will be able to provide you with information, guidance, and advice on matters such as provisions for conference funding, fora for networking, subscriptions, mentoring programs etc.

• ECAP Convenor support

The Early Career Academic Program (ECAP) Convenor is an important source of support available for ECAs. The Convenor is available to meet with you to brainstorm your research topic, provide feedback, talk through and advise on research project plans and how they fit in with your overall career direction and interests, as well as provide support and advice on your development as a researcher.

• Mentoring

Mentoring can be a very effective method to develop your research skills and improve your performance. It is important to note that different types of mentors are needed for different reasons. These may include: senior researchers with expertise in your field who can assist you directly with your proposed work; influential researchers with connections; and established researchers working in fields different to yours who can assist with other matters, such as protocols for research practice, time-management, networking and setting career goals.

Identify suitable mentors by asking around, utilising your time at conferences, and visiting other institutions.

• Peer Support

Senior colleagues and mentors may not always have an appreciation of your concerns. Interaction and sharing of experiences with others —including those working in different fields to you — who are at the same stage of their careers is an invaluable means of identifying common challenges and developing tactics to manage these challenges. Frequently raised concerns include management of heavy teaching loads, isolation, and fear of failure. Seek peer support by taking advantage of existing programs, such as the ECAP events, and by setting up your own networks that will enable an exchange of ideas.

**How do I advance my research career?**

Becoming research active requires more than an innovative topic, a research plan and support. It requires a grasp of the tools that will enable you to move into a successful research career. Here are some tips that may assist you:

• Understand what constitutes a body of work which others read and which changes how people view the world
• Focus on building a track record, as academics publish: generating publications 3-6 years after a PhD can begin to define a career; every publication counts
• Find your niche, decide on one topic
• Be mindful of how success is measured in your discipline and compare yourself to others.
• Network: this will enable you to become more known to find potential collaborators
• Beware isolation and seek collaboration: research groups build research cultures; co-authorship can assist you in building a record in prestigious outlets; a network of collaborators outside your institution can help you benchmark your work
• Seek and accept peer review opportunities: peer review can save you a significant amount of time in the preparation of publications and applications for research funding; peer review enables you to benchmark your own work
• Seek mentors: ensure you have a number of mentors who will assist you in developing your research career. Invest in these: make time for regular meetings, share ideas, and be prepared to accept criticism
• Harness the opportunity of the conference: identify what you thought were the seminal works presented and test your judgement over time; consider what senior people in the field responded to well that you didn’t; network
• Supervision of PhD and Honours students can help your research career
• Accept invitations to review papers and books
• Working across a variety of projects can help you find your research niche
• Expect failure
• Celebrate every small success

**How do I get funding?**

**Where do I start?**

In the first instance you should try to ascertain whether your research project requires external funding. Excellent research can be undertaken without substantial funding.

Be aware that competition for research funding can be extremely tough, so it is important to be realistic about your chances and to pursue funding opportunities that are appropriate for your stage of career. The most competitive funding schemes, such as the ARC’s Discovery Projects, require an exceptional research track record and, as such, are better suited for academics who are more advanced in their careers.
When starting out it is important to adopt a building block approach to funding, commencing with small grants where you will be competitive against the selection criteria. Speak with your ADR or mentor first about funding possibilities as they will have a good understanding of your requirements and the most suitable sources of funding.

How do I find opportunities?

Consider the following options:

- Internal faculty funding: each year faculties are given a slice of the overall block grant which the university receives from the government. Find out if you can access any funds to assist you in your work. Even a small amount, such as funds to attend a conference, can sometimes be beneficial for kick starting your project.

- External funding sources: the RSO website provides information on external opportunities.

- Talk to people: make an appointment with the Funded Research team, as they will be able to provide you with personalised assistance.

- Think broadly: do not wait for business to come to you; invite potential funding partners to visit; take advantage of being in Canberra.

How do I know if I will be competitive?

Read the funding rules and any other available documentation to ascertain the objectives of the scheme to ensure your work fits in with the aims. It is also crucial to familiarise yourself with the selection criteria, including their weighting. Selection criteria can include any of the following: research track record; significance of project; innovation; partner collaboration; institutional support. Their weighting may also vary. Failure to meet the selection criteria can instantly place you in an uncompetitive position.

If outcome reports with information on successful applicants or data sets are available, seek these out. This will enable you to benchmark yourself. For example, the ARC’s NCGP Dataset provides information on all completed and current projects. Don’t be afraid to contact successful applicants, as they may be willing to assist you. It is also important to seek peer review, as subject matter specialists and/or successful applicants will be able to provide you a realistic understanding of your competitiveness.

Contact coordinators of the funding schemes, as they may clarify any questions you have.

What should I expect?

Preparing funding applications is a lot of work. Start well ahead of the due date and enlist assistance from a mentor and peer reviewer as well as the RSO Grants team. Also, make sure that you check the weighting given to the various components of the application. Be prepared to compete even for small grants. Expect knock-backs and be prepared for unprofessional and unpleasant comments on assessments.
And finally...it’s not an easy road

But you should always remember: the University does respect research – it’s not just all about the money!

Teaching can distract from your research time. It is important to set aside regular time for your research. You could also combine your teaching with your research and make your teaching subject your field of research. Extra research work may also affect your work / life balance. Life is busy but research careers have intense phases and you need to time your work schedule accordingly.