

Imposter syndrome, procrastination, and perfectionism

Reframing the HDR journey

Being admitted into a Higher Degree by Research (HDR) program is an accomplishment in itself, but the high cultural value placed on HDR candidature means research students put a lot of pressure on themselves to be 'perfect'. When you fall short of perfection, it's common to think that you don't deserve to be researching at a university.

You might find it useful to reframe the HDR journey as being about developing a series of skills, rather than striving for perfection. Your thesis project is where you refine your research, writing and editing skills; build relationships; and become immersed in your field.

Dealing with 'impostor syndrome'

'Impostor Syndrome' is common among HDR students. It is characterised by the perpetual fear that you will be 'found out' as being a fraud. It brings feelings of incompetence and inadequacy, and often manifests in anxiety about your ability to complete your thesis, or find a job. SUPRA can assure you that every HDR student experiences this at some stage of their candidature.

6 tips on managing imposter syndrome

1. Try not to think of academia as a competition. It can often seem like one, for example, when another student has work accepted for publication; or you hear about supervisors missing out on grants; or when you follow academics arguing on Twitter. You don't need to share this competitive worldview. Instead, remember why you wanted to conduct research in your area of interest to begin with: your primary objective was probably not about 'winning'. Similarly, don't spend too much time comparing yourself to your peers' academic profiles.
2. Write a list of reasons you became interested in your discipline or project, and keep it where you can see it as you work, or refer to it

regularly. Similarly, and though it may seem cheesy, a list of inspiring quotes, images or memes can be helpful for when you're struggling. You could also try to download apps that automatically send you motivational quotes.

3. Remember that it's OK to talk to other people. Make the effort to attend seminars and workshops for HDR students that are organised by your faculty or school. It's likely that in these circles you will hear how your fellow researchers (whether staff or students) are struggling with their own feelings of inadequacy. Many HDR students find that having a supportive group of fellow students who are going through similar experiences helps them through the HDR process.
4. Keep a gratitude journal. Regularly taking time to reflect on your positive qualities is proven to be beneficial to boosting feelings of confidence and self-acceptance. Write a few concise points on what you have been grateful for recently. Try to make at least one of these points about a quality that *you* possess. There is no 'right' way of keeping a gratitude journal, but for some tips, [check out this article](#). There are many gratitude apps you can also use.
5. Develop a loose Plan B and even a Plan C. Finding other things that you can do with your career after your degree can take the stress off 'not being good enough' right now. You might also find other things to look forward to after your degree is completed.
6. Retain interests outside of the world of research. And by 'interests', we don't mean paid employment, parenting, or caring duties; even though these obligations might leave you with little energy for recreation. Join a monthly or weekly [meetup group](#) or a [student society or club](#) that is not dedicated to your research field. Try to regularly do something completely unrelated to your work goals, especially something physical that takes you out of your head, such as a sport, craft, or cooking. Remember there are a huge number of social worlds out there that won't judge you based on your research, the number of grants your project has, or who your coordinating supervisor is.

Avoiding perfectionism

Think back to when you were considering undertaking an HDR. The chances are you viewed this project as one early step on a longer journey, whether

that was an academic career, a chance to explore one of your passions, or post-degree employment in sectors outside of higher education. Your project is not meant to be the last thing you achieve as a researcher. Remember: your HDR thesis or publications are not your 'final word' on a topic.

One tip that experienced researchers and writing tutors give to postgraduates is to stop imagining the end product (i.e. the completed thesis), and instead break down your writing goals into weekly and daily blocks. [Check out this daily planner](#) that helps you work with your brain's energy levels throughout the day!

The University's [Counselling and Psychological Services \(CAPS\)](#) and [Learning Centre](#) offer free workshops on HDR skills, including how to avoid the pitfalls of having a perfectionist mindset. If you attend these workshops and are still struggling with finishing drafts or submitting them to supervisors because you're worried that your work is not good enough, book an individual appointment with one of the Learning Centre's lecturers and/or one of CAPS' counsellors for support.

Breaking down procrastination

Wanting your writing to be 'perfect' is often a paralysing attitude. It can lead to procrastination – losing your energy and focusing on tasks that aren't priorities.

5 anti-procrastination tips and tactics

1. **Learn about effective habits and routines.** Both the University's Learning Centre and CAPS run free workshops on establishing practices conducive to avoiding procrastination. You can also check out guides and resources online like blogs, vlogs, and social media forums. Some examples are:
 - [Finish Your Thesis](#) website
 - [Tara Brabazon YouTube channel](#)
 - [Finishyourthesis.com](#)

2. **Get used to writing in short blocks of time.** The goal is to write something every day, but often an HDR candidate will find that they are working on every kind of writing – like reviews, grant applications or marking – instead of their thesis. You won't always have the luxury of hiding away for hours of uninterrupted writing time. On some days, you will have to make do with short blocks of time before you have to move onto something else. Get used to doing short bursts of writing; it will help in any future job you have, including academia.
3. **Join others in the same situation.** Find others who are writing their thesis and work in the same room with them. You might help one another to stay on track.
4. Join or start a [Shut Up and Write!](#) Group, and see if it works for you.
5. **Structured writing days.** Start by setting a goal, then schedule short bursts of writing around breaks.

If your faculty does not have similar groups or events, consider organising one yourself. Contact your Postgraduate Research Coordinator to help you to book a room on campus and to promote the event to students in your faculty.

Other tips:

Academic Writing Month

Consider participating in [Academic Writing Month \(AcWriMo\)](#). Some universities promote this annual event to their HDR candidates. AcWriMo began as a way to use online networks to encourage academic writers to stop procrastinating and achieve their writing goals. Participants log how many words they have written and share these figures via social media.

Use technology wisely

Social media is an important part of HDR research and networking, but it can also suck up many hours of your day. A popular option is to use productivity

software, like [social media blockers](#). Ask around your faculty/field to see what apps/programs people have found useful.