plan it

Map your research from start to finish

Introduction

The *plan.it*, brought to you by the Postgraduate Office (PGO), has been designed to help you create a customised research project plan.

A project plan will turn a seemingly daunting task into a series of attainable steps. Since one can easily drift aimlessly, planning will give you the drive and momentum to complete your research degree on time. While it is inevitable that you will encounter some surprises along the way, planning reduces the chances of things going wrong and minimises the damage when they do.

A project plan, used in conjunction with a student-supervisor Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and the Council for Higher Education's Qualification Standard for Doctoral Degrees (2018), provides a useful basis for discussions between you and your supervisor.

The goal of a master's, but especially a doctorate, is to become an independent scholar, able to design and manage your own research project. Whether you work in a highly structured research team or mostly on your own, you remain responsible for finishing your thesis or dissertation on time.

We hope this planner will assist you to reach this goal.

The Postgraduate Skills Development Team

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How to use this planner

The *plan.it* lists all that needs to happen for you to complete your research degree. In the sample calendar provided, the steps, actions and deadlines have been squeezed into one year to illustrate milestones, but this is not realistic and is just an example of how to use the *plan.it*. Follow the steps below to draw up your own customised plan, spreading the steps over as many years required. Discuss your draft plan with your supervisor, there might be steps unique to your field, or faculty that you need to consider.

Step 1

The first row provides examples of typical **deadlines** in a research degree. Speak to your supervisor to ascertain which ones are relevant to your project. Record these dates in the top row of your empty planner. This forms the backbone of your plan.

Step 2

The second row lists the typical **steps** it takes to create a thesis or dissertation. Tick the steps you have done. Arrange the remaining steps in the second row, working backwards from your deadlines in Step 1. The times and order given here are only examples—many steps will overlap. Ask your supervisor for input and adapt to fit your time frame.

Step 3

The third row indicates the minimum **skills** required to complete a research degree. You probably already have some of these skills—tick them off! Insert the ones you want to develop and by when, in the third row.

Step 4

The fourth row records your **support** plan to develop the skills you need for Step 3. Consult the Research Support section in this planner to find relevant workshops and expertise. Contact the respective service providers to ascertain due dates, and add these to your planner.

Research support

When plotting your activities on your planner, it is important to see what is available and then to incorporate the support relevant to your project plan, like:

The **Research Degree Toolkit** A toolkit available on our Postgraduate Skills Development website, guiding you from the beginning stages of considering a research degree, through to preparing for your examination. Use this toolkit with this planner.

The Postgraduate Office hosts a range of **free workshops** (online and face-to-face) for SU postgraduates! Sign up via www.sun.ac.za/pgo/pgskills. In addition, find self-paced **online courses and training videos** for postgraduates on SUNLearn (learn.sun.ac.za). Search for 'Postgraduate Skills' once logged in and self-enrol for the Postgraduate Skills Development Online Training and Courses module. Find **writing** and **research ethics** resources there and research **ethics approval** information here: www.sun.ac.za/research.

Postgraduate Times **Newsletter** Check your emails for our monthly newsletter with news of upcoming postgraduate opportunities.

Your Faculty Librarian and the Research Commons staff are essential resources. Search for them and the Library's research-related training here: http://library.sun.ac.za. **Library** and Information Services

Consider how to communicate your research findings to a wider audience, who are not experts in your field. See our training resources covering science/research communication and the lay summary on our pgskills website. Share your **Research**

Research **Methodology** Support

Our Programme offers a *Creating your thesis or dissertation* workshop that covers the research process. Faculties offer specialised methodology courses occasionally—find out from your supervisor what your faculty offers.

Additional **Training**

In addition, SU has a number of short courses. See: www.shortcourses.sun.ac.za, and the African Doctoral Academy: www.sun.ac.za/ada.

Writing Support

The Writing Lab offers workshops and free academic writing consultations: languagecentre.sun.ac.za. The Enhancing Postgraduate Environments website houses useful academic writing (and other research-related) resources. Visit: postgradenvironments.com.

Editing Support

Have your thesis layout, language and referencing checked. Professional editing is costly, so save in advance. Book your editor early and leave at least two weeks before submission to give the editor enough time. See www.sun.ac.za/pgo/pgskills under *Resources* for a list of freelance editors.

Mental Health Support

If your stress becomes too much, reach out to the Centre for Student Counselling and Development. They offer free, academic counselling, and psychotherapeutic support: www.sun.ac.za/cscd.

IT Support

Contact the Research ICT Service desk for research-related IT queries. If relevant, utilise SU's e-survey service to collect your data or visit SU's software hub for free research related software like ATLAS.ti, or SPSS: www.sun.ac.za/softwarehub.

Data Management Tools and Support

Look for available SU data management, analysis and visualisation support during your planning phase, like the Library's data visualisation training and advice, or the Centre for Statistical Consultation (CSC) services for statistical analysis guidance: www.sun.ac.za/english/research-innovation/csc.

Phase One: Starting out

During this phase, you should create a project plan with the help of your supervisor. Identify key deadlines, research steps, as well as the support and resources you will need. Draft your research report as you progress — do not leave writing up to the end.

Phase Two: Mid-term goals

This phase of the project can be daunting. As the project unfolds, you may have to update your plans and review your expectations. Whatever happens, keep your supervisor informed. Remember your work-life balance, and your reasons for embarking on a research degree.

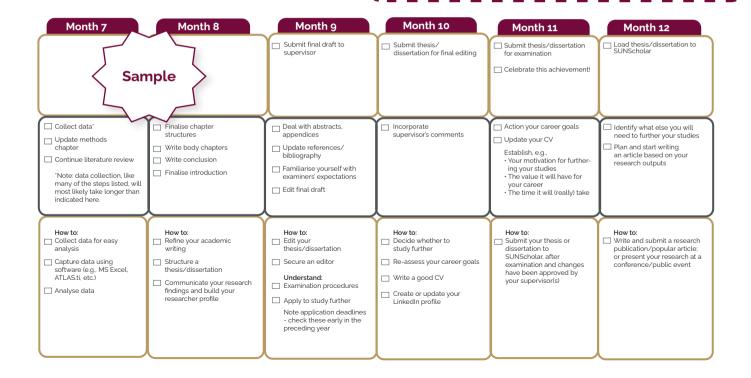|	Month 1	Month 2	Month 3	Month 4	Month 5	Month 6
Deadlines	☐ Contact supervisor — discuss expectations and sign a research agreement/ MoU ☐ Ascertain submission deadlines for proposal, for ethics approval (if required) and for thesis/ dissertation completion	☐ Contact your faculty librarian ☐ Show draft project plan to supervisor	☐ Hand in your research proposal (also known as a 'research protocol')	☐ Submit your research ethics application to your department's ethics review committee (DESC)	*The time spans allocated here are only illustrative and the steps are generic. Customise your planner with the guidance of your supervisor.*	
Research steps	☐ Decide on a topic ☐ Do preliminary research ☐ Identify a research problem ☐ Finalise a hypothesis or research question ☐ Start detailed secondary research	☐ Continue detailed secondary research ☐ Develop research design	☐ Continue detailed secondary research ☐ Decide on rough structure of thesis/dissertation ☐ Write Chapter 1 (Background info and research problem)	☐ Continue detailed secondary research ☐ Organise secondary research notes ☐ Write Chapter 2 (e.g., Literature review)	☐ Write Chapter 3 (Research design) ☐ Plan for outputs from your research project	☐ Start data collection once ethics approval is granted* ☐ Update methods chapter *Note: ethics approval can take up to three months or more!
Skills needed	**How to:** ☐ Choose a research topic ☐ Devise a literature search strategy ☐ Find and use relevant databases ☐ Formulate a research question or hypothesis ☐ Try out a reference tool (e.g., EndNote) **Understand:** ☐ The research process	**How to:** ☐ Project manage your research ☐ Manage your supervisor relationship **Understand:** ☐ The structure of the proposal/thesis/ dissertation ☐ Choose appropriate research methods for your research question ☐ Choose appropriate research instruments	**How to:** ☐ Write scientifically/in a scholarly or academic way **Understand:** ☐ Ethics considerations ☐ The procedure for getting research ethics approval at SU	**How to:** ☐ Create a well formatted electronic template to use when writing up your thesis/dissertation (using MS Word or Latex, for e.g.). ☐ Consult the Yearbook: General Information and Rules for the formatting requirements under sections 5.7 and 6.10	**How to:** ☐ Use data analysis software (e.g., ATLAS.ti or SPSS) ☐ Present your research at a conference or at a public event, or write and submit a research publication or a popular article	**How to:** ☐ Collect data related to your research question ☐ Use relevant research methods/instruments ☐ Find funding to further your studies

This phase is about consolidating your results and writing up your research. You will need to stay very focused on answering the research question. Know when to stop — your postgraduate research is only the beginning and not your life's work.

This phase covers your future plans — do you want to further your studies, start a career in academia or get work experience in industry? We encourage you to carefully consider the timing, costs and benefits of each option.

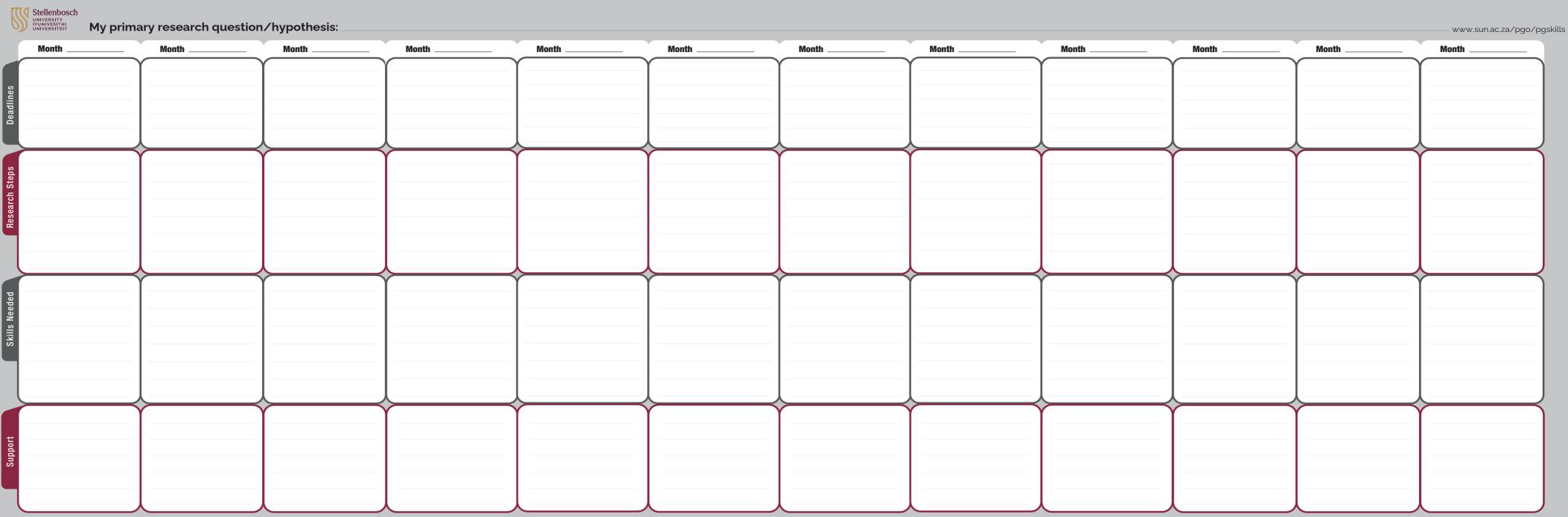| Month 7	Month 8	Month 9	Month 10	Month 11	Month 12
Sample		☐ Submit final draft to supervisor	☐ Submit thesis/dissertation for final editing	☐ Submit thesis/dissertation for examination ☐ Celebrate this achievement!	☐ Load thesis/dissertation to SUNScholar
☐ Collect data* ☐ Update methods chapter ☐ Continue literature review *Note: data collection, like many of the steps listed, will most likely take longer than indicated here.	☐ Finalise chapter structures ☐ Write body chapters ☐ Write conclusion ☐ Finalise introduction	☐ Deal with abstracts, appendices ☐ Update references/bibliography ☐ Familiarise yourself with examiners' expectations ☐ Edit final draft	☐ Incorporate supervisor's comments	☐ Action your career goals ☐ Update your CV Establish, e.g., • Your motivation for furthering your studies • The value it will have for your career • The time it will (really) take	☐ Identify what else you will need to further your studies ☐ Plan and start writing an article based on your research outputs
How to: ☐ Collect data for easy analysis ☐ Capture data using software (e.g., MS Excel, ATLAS.ti, etc.) ☐ Analyse data	**How to:** ☐ Refine your academic writing ☐ Structure a thesis/dissertation ☐ Communicate your research findings and build your researcher profile	**How to:** ☐ Edit your thesis/dissertation ☐ Secure an editor **Understand:** ☐ Examination procedures ☐ Apply to study further Note application deadlines - check these early in the preceding year	**How to:** ☐ Decide whether to study further ☐ Re-assess your career goals ☐ Write a good CV ☐ Create or update your LinkedIn profile	**How to:** ☐ Submit your thesis or dissertation to SUNScholar, after examination and changes have been approved by your supervisor(s)	☐ Write and submit a research publication/popular article; or present your research at a conference/public event

Other project management tools

This style of planner may not be for you—you need to work out what type of 'tool' will get you through. Other viable options are drawing up a Gantt bar chart to plot your project, or using electronic tools such as free web-based Gantt generators like www.tomsplanner.com. If you're not keen on a Gantt chart you could plan your project on a regular hardcopy calendar, or on an e-version calendar such as Microsoft Outlook or Mac iCalendar.

Your supervisor

Although there are many services at SU to help you complete your research degree on time, your supervisor remains the main guide and authority on your postgraduate journey.

Tip 1: Signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with your supervisor is a crucial and compulsory process at SU. An MoU gives structure to your project management—it forms an outline covering how to achieve your goal and clarifies certain expectations in the process between you and your supervisor. Your department should have their own MoU document. If they don't, see an example of an MoU under the *Resources* tab on our website www.sun.ac.za/pgo/pgskills.

Tip 2: Use the information provided in this planner to inform further discussions with your supervisor. Your supervisor will welcome you showing the initiative. Although you should manage your own effort and contribution (even in a structured research environment), it is still both wise and respectful to get your supervisor's input. Remember that most of the skills and steps discussed in this planner are generic, for discipline-specific skills and steps, be guided by your supervisor.

My primary research question/hypothesis: _____

Month ___	Month ___	Month ___	Month ___	Month ___	Month ___	Month ___	Month ___	Month ___	Month ___	Month ___	Month ___
Deadlines											
Research Steps											
Skills Needed											
Support											

Refer to the research phases, typical research steps, typical skills needed and support offered on the flip side of this planner to inform your project management structure. It is likely that you are going to need to refine or change your mapping occasionally, use small sticky notes to be able to reposition due dates or skills training dates easily.