Introduction

- I am making an assumption that (broadly) you know what your topic area is going to be
- In this session I will talk about how to progress and develop that topic through:
  - Addressing your own capabilities
  - Developing a research network
  - Narrowing your topic
  - Identifying a theoretical context
  - Selecting and undertaking research methods suitable to your topic
Capabilities

- You are central to this research exercise so it’s pretty important you address what you bring to the table.
- So in developing your topic area carefully assess your own abilities and limitations.
- Consider:
  - Your personality
  - Your motivations (what moves you!)
  - Your knowledge base
  - Your technical skills
  - Your limitations (resources, time etc)
Capabilities

- **RESEARCHER AUDIT**

- **Personal qualities**
  - Calm and methodical
  - Think strategically
  - Resilient - self disciplined
  - Good Reader
  - Innovative

- **Subject competence**
  - Physical geography
  - Politics
  - History
Capabilities

• **Skills competence**
  - Writing
  - Structuring arguments
  - Verbal presentation

• **Resource Opportunities**
  - Data set access
  - Embedded in organisation
  - $$$$$$$$$$$$$$!
Limitations

• We all have skills but we also ALL have limitations

• Good researchers know their limitations

• Good researchers work out how to neutralise their limitations
Limitations

• Resource, knowledge and skills limitations
  • Computing/analysis
  • Understanding of theory
  • Establishing contacts
  • Lack of $$$$$$$$$$$
Networks

- Having decided what you are good and bad at, your constraints and opportunities - the next question to address is your network capabilities
- Networks are personal contacts that you feel confident about calling on for assistance in covering your own capability limitations
PROJECT MANAGEMENT

• You are the PM

• Project goals = outcomes & beneficial change

• Do the right things... that lead to goals

• Do the things right... tasks along the way need to be performed correctly
Networks

• Such contacts could include:
  • Family - moral support, sustenance
  • Friends - distraction, honesty, help
  • Colleagues - advice, guidance
  • On line communities - feedback, samples
  • Supervisors - contacts, criticism, ideas
  • Organisations of which you are a part/member - data, contacts

The use of networks can assist you in developing your topic when you know that your network links can be used to overcome existing limitations that might constrain topic development
Networks

- We always tend to think of PhDs as a battle between an individual and the academic world.
- It’s not!
- You are much more than an individual; you are a connected member of a community.
- Use those connections!
Narrowing the Topic

• Once you have a topic area that you are comfortable with, the task is then to identify a specific aspect of that topic to research.

• The first thing to note is that the topic you are doing should:
  • be original/find out something new
  • make a *contribution* to your topic area/discipline - you must be able to locate what you find out within a disciplinary context
Narrowing the topic

- The smaller the scope of the topic you increase the depth of investigations
- The smaller the scope of the topic the more likely it is; to be original and you become an expert in it
- The smaller the scope of the topic the more likely you are to get (and keep!) your head around the topic
Narrowing the topic

• How do you narrow a topic

• Topic: Avant Garde cinema in the 1930s
  • Identify a component within your broad topic area that you would want to pursue
  • Avant Garde cinema in France in the 1930s
  • Identify a sub area that you want to concentrate on within the context of your topic area
  • The Depiction of Women in Avant Garde cinema
  • To get a more narrow topic such as:
    • The depiction of women in avant garde cinema in France in the 1930s
Narrowing the topic

• The smaller the topic the more likely you are to be able to explain it to participants
• The smaller the topic the easier it is to write it because by narrowing the topic you will overtly cut out many references, approaches and content
• Be brutal in your scoping!
Theory and research

- Theory is important because it addresses/answers the ‘why’ questions within your topic
  - Why is your topic an important topic to carry out research on? Why is it significant?
  - Why are there differences of opinion within your topic area?
  - Why hasn’t this research been carried out before?
  - Why are you interested in this topic?
  - Why aren’t other people interested in your topic?
  - Etc, etc
Theory and research

• The why questions are important because they invariably involve interrogating values and beliefs - what in theoretical terms we call ‘ideology’

• You will be attracted to some theories because they accord with your beliefs but you will be ‘distracted’ by others

• This is predictable and acceptable
Theory and research

- Theory is important because it identifies what is of accepted current significance to your topic area and thus enables you to determine your contribution
  - Theories evolve, change and adapt. They are adopted by the discipline and sometimes they are dropped
  - Theories outline the scope of a discipline; they begin to put boundaries around what is and what is not currently relevant within your disciplinary area - the concept of a paradigm
• Theory is important because it provides an accepted frame of reference
  • Theories (that you will be dealing with) have been accepted by the discipline - they have been argued about, justified, documented and incorporated into disciplinary thinking - this saves you doing the work!
Theory and research

- Theory is important because it contextualises (backgrounds) the issues that you are interested in researching
Theory and research

• Most students like to get the theoretical section of their dissertation out of the way and then forget it!
• However, for a theoretical section to have integrity, it should be revisited following your own original research.
Theory and research

• Theory is not going to go away so engaging with it as part of your dissertation is a good way to come to grips with its implications

• With a good understanding of theory you can readily understand the big picture issues facing our society and readily engage with other disciplines concerned about such issues

• Theory is a common language!
Background to Research Methods

• Having identified your topic and knowing that you have to write a lot of words on that topic you will quickly realise that you are going to need a lot of INFORMATION.
Background to Research Methods

• Research methods are all about obtaining that information
• As you will realise there are a myriad of ways of sourcing and finding out information
• The trick in preparing a research thesis is to find the most efficient and appropriate ways of finding the sort of information that is required to advance your topic
There are two basic sorts of information:

- **Secondary** information; that is information that somebody else has generated that you use in the course of your research.
- **Primary** information; that is information that you generate in the course of your research.
Background

- Most research that is undertaken uses a balance of primary and secondary information and thus incorporates a range of research methods to extract that information.

- While secondary information is usually used in setting up (contextualising) a topic, the use of primary information is generally at the core of a research exercise because the use of primary information generally ensures the originality of the research.
Secondary information

- Secondary information comes in all shapes and sizes but the most common source of secondary information is from:
  - 1. Books/articles/reports/websites
  - 2. Census/statistical data
  - 3. Other published data

- FIND REVIEW PAPERS!
Books/articles/reports

• You are all used to using books, articles, reports and websites as source material for essays, projects, presentations etc.

• Consulting these sources of information is probably the most common research method used - but is so common it is often overlooked as a research method!
Books/articles/reports

• This secondary information will be used to:
  • background your topic
  • identify practices within your discipline
  • establish the theory behind your topic
  • set your topic in a wider national/international context
  • identify competing views on a similar subject matter
• For all these reasons bibliographic review is a *central* research method to use in your dissertation
• Not only is it important it is also a research method which all of you have used and are familiar with
• Even at the earliest stages of research most students have made a start on this aspect of their dissertation
Census/statistical data

• The ABS is a massive depository of census and statistical data stretching back to the turn of the last century
• The quality and consistency of census/statistical data is very high in Australia (compared with most other countries)
• The data is broad and is regularly updated
Census data

- The ABS do more than conduct a survey of population and housing characteristics every five years.
- They collect statistics on a myriad of other things such as household spending patterns, recreation characteristics, tourist visitation information, local government activity etc.
- And a lot of this information hasn’t been analysed.
Census data

• The great thing about ABS data is that it is readily available via the web
• Again most students should have had some experience in extracting and using this information
• I would recommend to all students that they visit the ABS site
Other published data

- Organisations, institutions and individuals are gathering data and publishing it on a daily basis
- Government departments and universities are good sources of such information and what’s more the information is generally available and free - this is not necessarily the case for the private sector!
- Never neglect your fellow students work as a data source
Other published data

• When you are contemplating what primary data you are going to collect the first question you should ask yourself is has someone already found out this information and can I get hold of it!?

• If it is there use it (and of course acknowledge its source) and use your research energies in other areas
Primary information

• Gathering primary information on a research topic is generally at the core of a student dissertation.
• It's here that you earn your research stripes!
• Once you have exhausted your secondary information sources you will find that you still have information needs and it is down to you to generate this information.
Primary information

- What information you need will determine the research method you use to go about extracting that information
- The most common primary information needed in dissertations are:
Primary information

- Personal data; age, length of residency, qualifications etc
- Attitudinal data; what do you like/dislike, why etc?
- Expert views/insights; what is your view/opinion etc?
- Organisational/agency views; what are your objectives, how do you hope to achieve them?
- Use/frequency data; how often used/viewed/visited
- Assessment data; criteria analysis, effectiveness, consistency
- Historical data; archives, oral histories
To obtain such data there are a range of research methods that can be used. Most common are:

- Questionnaires
- Interviews
- Focus groups
- Policy Analysis
- Observation surveys/counts
- Textual analysis
Once you have created a ‘stock’ of primary information you then have the opportunity of creating further information by analysing that data in a range of different ways:

- Statistical analysis
- Modelling
- Interpreting
- etc
Primary information

• The application of a range of research techniques to generate a thorough information base on which to support your research findings is really what good research is all about.

• Do this aspect of your thesis well and you’ll pass do it badly and your research abilities will be open to question

• Good theses always use a variety of research techniques to generate a comprehensive information base

• Bad theses use limited information sources and then have to rely on opinionated, discursive waffle to reach their word limit!
Conclusion

• Theses need to be progressively advanced - they need momentum and once they have momentum it needs to be maintained

• Hopefully today I have identified some of the strategies to use in building the bridge between identifying a topic and progressing that topic
Conclusion

• While there is a lot to do in this period there is also a lot of variety
• Use the variety to keep yourself interested in your topic
• Interest and motivation are the most important contributors to research progression
Conclusion

• Remember that a thesis is not an end in itself - it is a pathway
• The capabilities you will acquire in producing a dissertation are also life/career skills and very valuable ones at that
• So never lose sight of the bigger picture in all of this
• Don’t obsess with content and outcome - *engage with the process*
• GOOD LUCK