Faculty of Graduate Research (FGR)

The Research Room

March 2025

Tips of the month

Here are some tips and tricks you can use to make your research experience at VUW much more productive and enjoyable

Getting job-ready with the right support becomes much easier

The pressure of finishing your research while thinking about your career can be overwhelming. It's a balancing act many students face—juggling the demands of research with the uncertainty of planning your next steps. It's completely normal to feel this way, and acknowledging the pressure is the first step toward managing it. But here's the good news: you don't have to navigate this transition alone.

One of the best ways to make this process smoother is by reaching out to the Wellington Careers and Employment team at the university. They offer valuable resources to guide you through the job market, from career advice appointments to having your job applications reviewed by career consultants. If you're unsure about your next move or need help tailoring your CV, this is the support you need. Simply make a free one-on-one appointment or send your questions to careers-service@vuw.ac.nz.

The team also offers a wealth of resources that cover every stage of your career journey. Whether you're just starting out or looking to refine your job search strategy, these comprehensive guides provide everything you need to know. I also recommend checking out their What can I do with my degree? section on their website. It's an incredible tool that lets you select your field of study and access tailored advice on potential career paths and where to find relevant opportunities. You might discover new career options you hadn't considered before, giving you more confidence as you plan your next steps. Don't hesitate to make use of these free, valuable services – they're there to support you!

On top of that, do not forget about the hidden job market. This refers to opportunities that aren't advertised publicly, and it's a valuable strategy to explore—particularly if you're aiming to work in smaller organizations or highly competitive sectors. You might already be familiar with it—maybe you've landed part-time work through networking or by directly reaching out to an employer. The hidden job market is all about making connections, building meaningful relationships, and uncovering opportunities before they even hit the job boards. It's not just about applying for posted jobs, but about creating opportunities through proactive engagement. While it may require a bit more effort, the rewards are well worth it when you discover roles that are perfectly aligned with your skills and career goals. Learn how to tap into it.

Dr William Eulatth Vidal – FGR, Victoria University of Wellington

Share your story

When utilized effectively, stories can be powerful tools to motivate and change minds. If you need an extra dose of motivation, this story should help you out

Starting my PhD: Wrestling with the unknown and life lessons for moving forward—Richard

I have no idea what I'm doing…

At some level, this isn't entirely true. I'm pursuing a PhD in Computer Science and have a supervisor with whom I meet most weeks to discuss the progress I have made. My research focuses on computationally modelling bird populations in Aotearoa using different datasets, looking at possible vectors and responses to avian bird flu. It sounds catchy, interesting, and potentially useful. I have another six months to write up a proposal, and if I pass, I'll continue my studies for the remainder of my time here. I'm aiming to pass!

At another level, sure, all of that sounds nice, but the reality is, I still have no idea what I am doing. My codebase feels like a maze, constantly shifting between programming languages. Right now, I'm dealing with a tooling problem— syncing R code with a Jupyter Notebook—and I'm seriously considering throwing in the towel (again) and switching back to building an R Shiny app. ChatGPT has given me lots of positive affirmation on my questioning skills, but unfortunately, its answers are sadly wilted. My data looks dirtier than I'd like, and I'm starting to question whether meaningful conclusions can even be drawn from community science observations. Sometimes, I even wonder if I want to.

This level of uncertainty is both a curse and a blessing. It's scary and can often feel like a waste of time, leaving me unsure if I am moving in the right direction. But on the flip side, this uncertainty means I am learning. While the challenges I face may be unique to my experience, they are not unique to me—others have wrestled with these issues before.

As someone enrolled in a PhD program, wrestling with these uncertainties is not only OK, but also an essential part of the process. A PhD is a prolonged period of study, with guidance and support from the university, all culminating in a single thesis that must contribute novel research. If you already know exactly how it will end from the start, chances are, you're not approaching it the right way. And if you know exactly what you're doing and how to do it, then why are you in a PhD programme at all?

Thoughts like these sustain me on days when I wonder if I ought to have taken up scuba-dive instructor or rat tsar as a vocation instead. Leonard Cohen once wrote that he wished he was a brick-layer—at least they have something tangible to show for their efforts. I vibe with that.

Unlike previous Share Your Story columns in this newsletter, I have the distinct displeasure of not having finished my PhD yet. I'm not saying I've failed it (give me time). Instead, I've only just begun. It's difficult to say what lessons I have learned so far. I can't yet share how my obstacles have become stepping stones towards a doctorate, a tenured professorship, the job of vice-chancellor, and a beautiful oceanside mansion featuring three en-suite libraries. What I can share are some steps I am actively taking to deal with the precarious nature of studying for a PhD. So here, in no particular order, are some of those steps.

Lean into networking. I moved here from Vermont last winter, and I'll admit it's still difficult to call July "winter". This isn't my first time living abroad, nor my fifth: I did my undergraduate studies in Scotland, followed by my Master's in Germany and Malta. I've also lived in Canada, and debatably, Switzerland, Antigua, and Southeast Asia. When I first moved to Scotland, I knew no one. But when I moved here with my partner, things were different. I already knew a few people, and that helped immensely.

I stayed at my friend's house for a few weeks while we searched for our own place. I met this friend 15 years ago in Scotland after responding to an ad for free kung fu movies on a Trademe clone. When I went to collect them, he asked if I wanted a beer. Fast-forward to today—I'm now living here.

I first met my advisor at a conference here last year after reaching out to a professional contact for recommendations on where to learn about computer science in New Zealand. That contact is affiliated with the New Zealand eScience Infrastructure, which manages the country's supercomputing clusters. Our connection dates

back to a workshop in New Orleans in 2014. At the end of the day, I was lingering around, hoping to find someone to join for dinner. That's when he and I ended up sharing a meal. Little did I know, ten years later, he would become instrumental in helping me. My car came through a former coworker. You get the idea!

What unites these random, serendipitous stories is the power of connection, sharing, and effort. Talk to people and figure out what they do. See if there's a way you can help them—even if it is just taking bad Jackie Chan movies off of their hands. And be intentional about it: I have a script that emails me daily with a name from a list, reminding me to reach out to that friend if I haven't in a while. Although I don't manage to do it every day, every little bit helps.

Look for scholarships. When I first arrived here, I didn't know that many scientists, so I decided to go where they were. I joined the Entomology Society, the Royal Society Te Apārangi, the Wellington Botanical Society (BotSoc), Wikimedia Aotearoa New Zealand (WANZ), and a few others. One day, the BotSoc put out a note about scholarships for their summer camp. I had no idea what it was about, but it sounded like a fun time in the bush with a bunch of botanists. I threw in an email and then forgot about it.

A few months later, I received a note saying my scholarship had been approved. I cancelled all of my meetings for the next week and booked a ferry. Spending nine days in Nelson Lakes National Park was awesome. Each day, we walked to a different mountain or ecosystem, and just stood around in the bush, botanizing. I set up an iNaturalist project, where people could log their observations. Every night, I went over hundreds of photos I had taken and uploaded them. I learned so much!

Me hiking at Nelson Lakes National Park

This week, I went through those observations and compiled lists of biota that private landowners could use to inform their land management practices. The data I worked with was a bit dirty and needed cleaning, so I used Open Refine—a data-cleaning tool. I had the opportunity to learn about Open Refine thanks to a small scholarship I received from WANZ. I applied for that scholarship after hearing the organizers at Wikipedia meetings repeatedly encourage participants, saying: "Please apply for scholarships; we want to help you!" I took their word for it.

A brittle star I renamed

While cleaning the BotSoc data with my Wikimedia tool, I realized I could probably use Open Refine for my thesis work. I had similar dirty data in one of my projects, so I decided to give it a try—and it worked saving me days and weeks of time.

None of this would have been possible if I hadn't applied for scholarships I didn't know I needed, for projects I wasn't sure would help me. But trusting the process—learning what works, doing what I can, and sharing my knowledge with others—has made my PhD easier.

Tackle the low-hanging fruit. One of the joys of being in the early stages of my PhD is that there's an infinite amount of stuff I don't yet know. Part of what I don't know includes scoping for my own work; at this moment, I can't say exactly what I'll end up doing. With so many potential threads to

explore, pulling on them a bit can lead to unexpected and interesting outcomes.

For instance, I am a birdwatcher. Walking down the beach using eBird, another community science app, I found myself wondering what subspecies of Kelp Gull live in New Zealand. After consulting the BirdsNZ checklist, I found a whole section on the southern black-backed gull, or karoro, including the original descriptions and later citations. I noticed two Latin names—Larus antipodus and antipodum—This piqued my curiosity: Why are there two names?

It turned out that one scholar had attended correcting another scholar's Latin, but the effort was far from perfect. The correction was buried in a footnote and misinterpreted by others. To complicate matters, someone pointed out in 2002 that the original description wasn't technically valid according to the rules of scientific naming. But no one had fixed it.

Yet.

A few months later, with lots of help, I wrote a short paper on karoro nomenclature—now accepted by an academic journal. That paper turned into another paper, fixing the Latin for a fossilised penguin. And then another, on a brittle star, I found off Island Bay.

When I talked to my supervisor this week, I mentioned my challenges with dirty data across different datasets. I also pointed out the lack of an API for a taxonomic ontology of bird species, which could help resolve differences in species names. Such a tool would be incredibly useful for researchers, and it's the kind of thing that would fit well in a Computer Science degree focused on modelling bird observations. He agreed.

I wouldn't have gotten there at all if I hadn't gone "huh" while reading something random and unrelated, and then just seeing where my curiosity went.

Take risks. Of course, it's easy to look back now and say all of this was intentional. I obviously knew when I picked up kung fu movies I would end up sleeping on my friend's couch 15 years later (No, it was not obvious). I knew that botany would lead to better data management (botany?). I even knew that looking at seagull names would be relevant (no, I didn't).

What I do know is that giving myself the freedom to mess up, to read around and find out, and to follow my nose—that freedom is a big part of what makes a PhD possible and what makes good research. There are no clearly laid lines to new science. Every study is a potential risk, but every risk is also a potential source of joy. Starting a PhD can feel a lot like diving off a cliff—terrifying yet exhilarating.

Of course, ask me again in a year how my new job as a scuba-diving instructor is going. I'll probably say, "I have no idea what I'm doing."

Richard Littauer, School of Engineering and Computer Science, Victoria University of Wellington

Useful resources

Explore our list of research-related links that will help you throughout your research studies

Have you heard of Prosple? It's your go-to platform for finding internships, graduate programs, and graduate jobs in New Zealand. Prosple connects you with top opportunities across a variety of sectors.

Do Good Jobs: It's a platform for finding meaningful work in New Zealand's not-for-profit and community sectors. The platform features job listings with pay rates, ensuring transparency and helping you find roles that match your skills and compensation expectation.

Events happening soon

Looking for other events happening inside and outside VUW? We go over some interesting events happening worldwide

Organizer	Event	Date and Time	Register
Human Ethics Team, Victoria University of Wellington	Human Ethics: Training session *(dual delivery)*	12 Mar, 10:00–11:00 NZST	Here
Student Learning Team, Victoria University of Wellington	Monday morning writes *(In person)*	03 Mar, 09:00–10:30 NZST	Here
	Academic writing at a PG level *(In person)*	04 Mar, 14:00–14:50 NZST	Here
	Critical thinking 3-week series *(In person)*	05, 12, 19 Mar, 10:00–11:50 NZST	Here
	Monday morning writes *(In person)*	10 Mar, 09:00–10:30 NZST	Here
	How to summarise, paraphrase and cite in PG writing *(In person)*	11 Mar, 14:00–14:50 NZST	Here
Australasian Cognitive Neuroscience Society	Landing a Post Doc and getting Promoted: Tips on how to succeed *(Online)*	24 Mar, 13:00 NZST	Here
Litmaps	Future ready scholar conference	12, 13 Mar, 08:00– NZST	Here
Lumivero	Thematic analysis in NVivo15	18 Mar, 12:00–ET	Here
Taylor & Francis	Building and maintaining trust with open research *(Online)*	06 Mar, 05:00–06:30 NZST	Here
	Trust the process: How to become an effective peer reviewer *(Online)*	20 March, 04:00–05:30 NZST	Here
Statistics Solutions	Quantitative analysis *(Online)*	07 Mar, 07:00 NZST	Here
	Qualitative analysis *(Online)*	14 Mar, 06:00 NZST	Here
	Beyond the basics: A practical guide to data analysis *(Online)*	21 Mar, 06:00 NZST	Here
Crosby Management Training Ltd	Functional skills: Academic writing workshop *(Online)*	07 Mar, 02:00-03:30 NZST	Here
Sinead Hewson, Unconventional Doctorates	Writing habits and best practise for Doctoral Candidates *(Online)*	29 Mar, 04:00-05:00 NZST	Here
CRIPticArts	Mind and soul: The key ingredients of writing. How much of me? *(Online)*	12 Mar, 07:30-09:30 NZST	Here
Global Edge Leaders	The art of public speaking *(Online)*	13 Mar, 04:00-05:00 NZST	Here
Skillsme Academy UK	How to turn your presentations from boring to brilliant *(Online)*	05, 12, 19, 26 Mar, 07:00-08:30 NZST	Here
Denver Workforce Development	Interview tips and tricks *(Online)*	06, 13, 20, 27 Mar	Here
	Introduction to online job searching *(Online)*	06, 13, 20, 27 Mar	Here
	Resume tips n' tricks *(Online)*	06, 20 Mar	Here

**Please note that by listing these events we are not endorsing any organisations but rather compiling and sharing a list of resources that may be helpful.*

FGR

The Faculty of Graduate Research (FGR) works to ensure that your experience as a thesis student is a positive one. For more information, visit our website

Contact

Postgraduate Research Student Advisers: FGR-postgrads@vuw.ac.nz

- *Enrolling in your doctoral or master's programme.*
- *Candidature management changes. Online forms for thesis candidature changes can be found here.*

Thesis Examinations:FGR-Exams@vuw.ac.nz

- *Submission or examination of theses.*

Doctoral Admissions and Scholarships: pg-research@vuw.ac.nz:

- *Doctoral applications or the doctoral application process*
- *Scholarships*

Learning and Development: william.eulatthvidal@vuw.ac.nz