

Motivation & postgraduate study

Motivation – A challenge for postgraduate students

Motivation allows us to overcome obstacles. It is the force that keeps us going in the face of difficulties and drives us to achieve our goals. While most postgraduate students start their course of study being highly motivated, staying motivated throughout the duration of their study is often a challenge.

This flyer discusses why some postgraduate students experience motivation problems and provides some suggestions about how to maintain or regain motivation during the course of postgraduate study.

What motivates you?

Generally people are motivated by doing something that they enjoy, working with people they like, engaging in something that is challenging but not too hard, and completing something that has both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards.

As a postgraduate student, consider the things that are important to you and that you value. If these are lacking from your course you may find it difficult to maintain enthusiasm and motivation for your studies. Thus it is important to build these factors into your study program. For example, if you value working with others, make sure you have the opportunity to engage in academic discussions with your colleagues; similarly if you are motivated to achieve specific goals make sure you have clearly identified and realistic target goals.



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Why is motivation a problem for postgraduates?

Postgraduate students often encounter decreased motivation because:

- A postgraduate course takes time and commitment; however, your emotional and social lives continue, family and employers make demands and new interests arise. If you have other complicating factors, such as being away from home, falling ill, money problems, or new responsibilities or relationships, it is understandable that it may be hard to make progress in your studies.
- As you progress through your course it may seem that there are few rewards available. Feedback may feel like criticism and it may seem that you are making limited progress for your efforts.
- Working alone is often isolating; your friends may be bored hearing about your topic or may fail to appreciate the challenges of your work.
- If your supervisor is not providing you with support or feedback, you may feel discouraged.
- You may experience problems with the academic content or the writing up of your project or paper, and may be unsure how to manage this.
- Other demands in your life may have changed. You may feel that a higher degree is no longer important or you have lost the passion for your topic.
- You may be experiencing a mental block and cannot go any further with your research and/or writing.

Having these feelings can affect your course progress.

However, if you talk with other higher degree students or students who have completed their degree, you will find that these experiences are quite common!

If you have motivation problems, try first to identify why this is happening. This will help you to take control and develop some strategies to help you manage your particular situation.

To evaluate what may be hindering your progress review the following:

Review	Questions
1. Academic goals	Are they the same as when you first started? Are they realistic?
2. Other life influences	Do they need attention before you can progress?
3. Study routine	Do you have an effective study routine? Is your work environment distracting?
4. Support systems	Is your supervisor providing helpful feedback? Do your family and friends support you in your study requirements?

Get a good start!

Most students are excited to begin their postgraduate studies and many are able to develop an independent way of working right from the start. Other students feel less confident and initially may require more direction from their supervisors. Irrespective of your learning style, many students have found it helpful to incorporate the following suggestions into their study routine:

- Try not to always work in isolation. Become involved in the life of your department, make links with other students and create a network of good listeners and people who understand and can discuss your work with you.
- Clarify roles and expectations with your supervisor (both yours and theirs).
- Develop a timeline of tasks to be completed over the duration of your study. This helps you keep on track and provides indicators of your achievements along the way.
- Pay attention to your physical, emotional and spiritual health. It is a long journey to a postgraduate degree, so ensure you are healthy enough to last the distance. Inadequate sleep, poor eating and lack of exercise may cause illness and lead to decreased motivation.
- Reward yourself for tasks achieved and time frames met. Include both small celebrations (dinner out or a movie) and large rewards (a holiday) to recognize your progress
- Share your experiences with the people who matter to you and who love you. Keep them up to date and let them know when and how they can help.

Maintain your focus

Postgraduate students can become anxious, insecure and bored with their work. The following strategies may help you to maintain focus and stay motivated:

Manage your time effectively

- Have short, medium and long-term goals. These help break up thesis or course work assignments into 'chunks of work' that you can more easily complete.
- Progress can become more automatic if you develop and maintain a regular work routine; however, allow yourself to also enjoy some flexibility and spontaneity both in your academic work and your leisure activities.
- Try to make some progress each day in at least one area of your work. You cannot do everything, but you *can* always do something.

Use your networks

- Set up regular meetings with your supervisor to identify goals or sections of work to be completed and time frames for them to be completed by.
- Network with peers and academic staff both within and outside your faculty. If they know about your study they may be able to offer you valuable resources, ideas, feedback and encouragement.

- Organise a study group with other students. Meet regularly to share your work, your accomplishments, your frustrations and your solutions.
- Recognise your achievements by giving yourself positive feedback for work completed. Postgraduate students are often their most severe critic – why not also become your own cheerleader?

What if you have lost your motivation?

Some students may feel they are unable to continue their study. If this happens it is important to understand why this is happening and to seek assistance.

When reviewing this situation consider the following:

- Get a clear picture of what you have already completed and what you now need to accomplish and then move on.
- Talk with your supervisor. This is often the time when the supervisor-student relationship becomes strained because many postgraduates think their supervisors will not understand their loss of motivation. However, you should keep the communication lines open – your supervisor may have some valuable suggestions for regaining your motivation.
- Complete some specific tasks. Getting into the habit of achieving small goals is a great way to make progress towards bigger goals.
- Work in an environment that encourages you to focus on your studies. It's easy to waste time by getting side tracked; for example, if working at home is not effective, relocate to the laboratory or even to the office next to your supervisor.
- Seek academic support from university services such as the School of Graduate Studies and the Language and Learning Skills Unit.
- It's difficult to make progress if you have personal issues that are significantly impacting on your progress. Professional services such as counselling, healthcare, housing and financial assistance are available for all students at the university.

Finally, remember that you are a student. You are busy becoming the expert in your specific topic, but you are still learning – and you will keep learning after you have completed your postgraduate study. You can't write a thesis or a postgraduate assignment on day one – you need to work towards it.

Further reading

Covey, S. (1991). *The seven habits of highly effective people: Restoring the character ethic*. Melbourne: The Business Library.

Elphinstone, L. & Sweitzer, R. (1998). *How to get a research degree: A survival guide*. St Leonards, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin.

Maxwell, M. (1997). *Improving student learning skills*. Clearwater: H&H Publishing.