

The Research Room

October 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

Design your workspace to think better, not just sit better

Thesis writing is a cognitively demanding task that requires sustained attention, deep thinking, and mental clarity over extended periods. However, a cluttered or poorly designed workspace can increase cognitive load, leading to fatigue, burnout, and diminished focus.

Cognitive ergonomics—designing environments that support mental processes—is essential not just for comfort, but for clarity. By streamlining your setup, minimizing distractions, and using tools that simplify rather than complicate your workflow, you free up valuable mental bandwidth for actual thinking and writing. A well-optimized environment helps maintain concentration, reduces mental strain, and supports a productive flow state. When your workspace is aligned with your cognitive needs, writing becomes less of a struggle and more of a sustainable, focused process. For practical strategies and insights into optimizing your research setup, check out [this article from the SPRINT project](#)

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

Learning to swim in academic waters—María José

I'm a second-year PhD student from Chile, and moving to New Zealand marked my first experience living in a country where Spanish isn't the language of everyday life. Let's just say it's been quite the adventure. If I had to sum it up: imagine being thrown into a pool without knowing how to swim. Now picture that pool filled with academic jargon, cultural surprises, and occasional awkward silence. Welcome to my PhD journey!!

Just a few months after arriving, I was offered the chance to be a Teaching Assistant. Exciting, right? Except I had no idea how the university system worked, my English was shaky, and I'm painfully shy. Every time I had to speak in public, or even just talk to strangers, it felt like my brain was heading straight for the emergency exit. But that experience showed me exactly what I needed to work on, and I'm grateful for the splash of reality.

During my first year, I managed to gather some data and present a poster at an international conference—a definite highlight! I met amazing researchers, made valuable connections, and

learned a lot. But around that same time, I also had my one-year progress meeting. I was terrified of failing... and then I did. The committee gave me three more months to improve my research proposal. One comment that really stuck with me was that I needed to improve my English. Ouch. It hit hard! I felt like a failure, and it crushed my confidence. I didn't even want to talk to anyone at the conference afterward. I was navigating cultural shock, a language barrier, and a heavy dose of imposter syndrome—all at once.

But here's the thing: I love research. That's the one truth I held onto. After licking my wounds for a few days, I realized I had two options: retreat or adapt. So, I chose to adapt. I took a part-time job that required me to talk to customers. Yes... on purpose! Just to improve my English and communication skills. It wasn't easy. One time, a group of kids laughed at my accent. I get it—maybe I sound like Sofia Vergara—but when you're trying your best and people laugh, it stings. Still, I learned to laugh with them (or at least pretend), and now I actually enjoy the job.

I also leaned on the university's support systems, thanks to the committee's recommendations. The student learning support team was fantastic—they helped me improve my writing and language skills. Gradually, I started talking more about my research, even when it wasn't perfect, or I didn't have all the answers. I joined a volunteer science talk at Zealandia and really enjoyed chatting with curious visitors about what I'm working on. It was a great way to practice science communication and share what I love.



After one year and three months, I finally got the committee's approval. I'm officially a PhD candidate now, and honestly, it feels surreal. Remember that course I was a teaching assistant for just a few months after arriving in New Zealand? Well, this year I was offered the Lead Teaching Assistant role. Funny how life loops back

around. I used to feel like I was barely keeping up, and now I get to help guide others through the same journey. Growth is often slow, quiet, and built on moments you once thought you'd never get through.

And to top it off, I recently received funding to develop an experiment I'm genuinely excited about. I'll be involving undergraduate students so they can get hands-on experience and explore whether research might be a path they'd like to pursue. It feels good to be in a place where I can support others while continuing to grow myself.



So yes, the PhD journey is hard. But it's also full of unexpected joys, awkward laughs, and small victories. Whether you're an international student navigating a new culture and language, or a domestic student facing your own set of challenges, trust me, you're not alone. There will be moments when you feel like you're sinking, like everyone else knows what they're doing and you're just trying to stay afloat. But those moments don't define you. What matters is how you respond. Keep going. Ask for help. Laugh at your mistakes. Celebrate the small wins. And remember: even if you don't know how to swim, you'll learn. One splash at a time!

María José Ramírez, School of Biological Sciences, Victoria University of Wellington

Useful resources

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

[The PhD Survival Guide Podcast](#)

Offers relatable stories and advice for every stage of the PhD journey. What it covers: Navigating grad life, dissertation writing, motivation, and academic challenges.

Events happening soon

Looking for other events happening at the University and beyond? We go over some interesting events happening worldwide

Opportunities from other institutions

Organizer	Event	Date and Time	Register
Ako. Aotearoa	Inclusive by design: Building safer, stronger learning communities (<i>Online</i>)	01 Oct, 12:30–13:10 NZST	Here
National Centre for Research Methods	A panel session on responsible AI in research	01 Oct, 18:00–20:30 BST	Here
Statistics Solutions	Quantitative analysis	03 Oct, 06:00 NZST	Here
	Qualitative analysis	10 Oct, 06:00 NZST	Here
	Beyond the basics: A practical guide to data analysis	17 Oct, 06:00 NZST	Here
Zenspeak Public Speaking Center	Overcome your fear of public speaking (<i>Online</i>)	Different date and time options	Here
Skillsme Academy UK	How to turn your presentations from boring to brilliant (<i>Online</i>)	01 Oct, 06:00 NZST	Here
Science Media Centre	Talk: Tips on communicating your research and Social media for researchers (<i>Online</i>)	30 Oct, 06:00 NZST	Here
Ideas on stage UK	How to help your team present with confidence and impact (<i>Online</i>)	02 Oct, 04:00 NZST	Here

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

Happening here: Events at our university

Organizer	Event	Date and Time	Register
Student Learning	Monday morning writes (<i>In person</i>)	06 Oct, 09:00–10:30 NZST	Here
	Preparing for conferences: Abstracts, posters, and presentations (<i>In person</i>)	07 Oct, 14:10–15:00 NZST	Here
	Monday morning writes (<i>In person</i>)	13 Oct, 09:00–10:30 NZST	Here

Organizer	Event	Date and Time	Register
Student Learning	Maintaining and regaining momentum in your thesis (Online)	15 Oct, 17:30–19:00 NZST	Here
	Monday morning writes (In person)	20 Oct, 09:00–10:30 NZST	Here
	Addressing Writer's block (Online)	22 Oct, 17:30–19:00 NZST	Here
	Working with your brain: Focus work sessions (online)	29 Oct, 17:30–19:00 NZST	Here

FGR

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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