

# POSTGRADUATE NEWS

Hugh Kearns, a guest of the University's Graduate Research Month, talks to the *Bulletin* about procrastination, self-sabotage and turbocharging your research writing.

## Tackling postgraduate research problems

It may seem a long way from an undergraduate degree in agricultural science to an international career in cognitive behavioural coaching, but it is not really that far if you travel along the path taken by Hugh Kearns.

The man who has become an international expert on self-management for academics recently brought his highly sought-after insights to Otago, where he offered workshops for postgraduate students facing the daunting prospect – even if it is in soft copy – of a blank piece of paper.

“Turbocharge your writing” and “The seven secrets of highly successful research students” are just two of the many workshops Mr Kearns and his colleague Maria Gardiner have developed to assist students and academics to better manage their workloads and constructively deal with the many barriers our minds subconsciously construct.

He explains that his approach uses cognitive behavioural coaching techniques – traditionally utilised for people with clinical problems – to help high performing people identify the issues holding them back and develop strategies for dealing with them.

Mr Kearns' initial discipline of agricultural science led him into teaching where he became interested in adult education – hence his Master's degree in Education. But when he stepped from there into executive training he began to wonder why courses which were so in demand on subjects like time management tended nonetheless to fail in their purpose. Why was it, he asked

himself, that bright, capable – even driven – people struggled with basic stuff like deadlines?

Mr Kearns figured this question could be answered by psychology, hence his decision to tackle a Master of Mental Health degree. It was in the course of doing this that he discovered that “knowing things isn't enough” – people had to re-programme their minds to ultimately change their behaviour.

Telling someone how to better manage their time, for example, will not result in any lasting change to their time management skills. The trick is to get people to recognise what is going on in their head – the subliminal conversation they are having with themselves which is contributing to their sense of powerlessness in the face of a full diary – and combat it.

These kind of skills are important for research students (as well as academics generally), Mr Kearns explains, because their work is strongly self-directed and therefore requires a lot of self-discipline. There is also a lot of emotional investment in their work when it is their sole focus, so feelings of inadequacy can quickly snowball into an overwhelming sense of defeat.

In the workshops Mr Kearns offered on-campus in Dunedin he explained the difference between a “snack writer” – someone who writes for short blocks of time whenever they can – and a “binge writer” – someone who convinces themselves they need a clear run of several hours and total isolation in order to write, and therefore seldom manages to achieve this.



Cognitive Behavioural Coach Hugh Kearns who had plenty of advice for students during Graduate Research Month.

**“Predictors for research success are more than just intelligence.”**

He introduced the idea of the “two golden hours” to refer to an immensely productive but relatively short period of time equal or superior in terms of output to eight hours of “fantasy writing” for which there is little to show.

Mr Kearns also explained the concept of the “imposter syndrome”, where a candidate's internal voice tells them they are just pretending to be good enough to get a PhD but are not really up to the task.

He introduced strategies for helping to deal with these and many other acts of self-sabotage in order to keep a candidate positive and productive.

Universities as illustrious as Stanford, Oxford and Columbia invite Mr Kearns to give his workshops there, which proves that top scholars everywhere face the same internal challenges. It is no surprise then that Mr Kearns lobbies for universities to provide cognitive behavioural support for both academic staff and postgraduate students.

“Predictors for research success are more than just intelligence,” he points out, “and while there is usually support for the logistics of being a researcher, such as writing or research skills, not a lot of effort goes into this type of support. Yet it's beneficial for everyone, because the students will have a better research experience and go on to be better researchers and supervisors. They'll also speak positively about their experience with other potential students, which reflects well on the university. It's a win-win situation.”

For more information about other Graduate Research Month events, check out the calendar of events at [www.otago.ac.nz/gradresearchmonth](http://www.otago.ac.nz/gradresearchmonth)