



# Experiment-itis: more research needed

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Do you have four or five half-finished academic articles on your desk but would rather start a sixth than submit one? Do you often think that if you just carry out one more experiment then your work will be good enough to write up — but it never is?

Perhaps it seems that you spend all day working, but have nothing to show for it, or that you are just too busy to focus properly on your research?

If so then you may be a victim of "self-sabotage".

Perfectionism, over-committing and procrastination are rife among PhD students and can stop talented high achievers from completing their theses on time or at all, according to Hugh Kearns, head of the staff development and training unit at Flinders University in Australia.

And because the stakes for academics only get higher after gaining a doctorate, self-sabotage can be a career-long problem.

The nature of the PhD encourages isolation, prompting anxiety to grow alongside a certain degree of perfectionism, Mr Kearns told the UK Higher Education Researchers' Development conference this week. Over-committing is a frequent response to this fear, giving students an excuse for failure.

For others, the knowledge that the thesis can never be perfect is so crippling that they can develop what he has jokingly termed "read-itis" or "experiment-itis".

Gathering more information is pleasant and non-confrontational and, crucially, puts off the day when a thesis has to be finished, he said. Academics, too, can be guilty of prioritising teaching and even administration to avoid writing up their research.

The trick, said Mr Kearns, is to set regular writing hours, "almost nail your feet to the floor" and write anything, no matter how bad it seems or how slowly it comes.

Supervisors should be careful not to let students go unsupported

for long periods of time on the assumption that they'll get in touch if there is a problem. "That's the last time they're going to come to you," Mr Kearns said.

He also urged supervisors to "give that normalising effect, and explain where the standard is" since many dedicated PhD students end up writing as if for a Nobel Prize. He reminds students at his workshops: "If you hand in a thesis it's very likely you will be successful."

**Working knowledge, page 54**