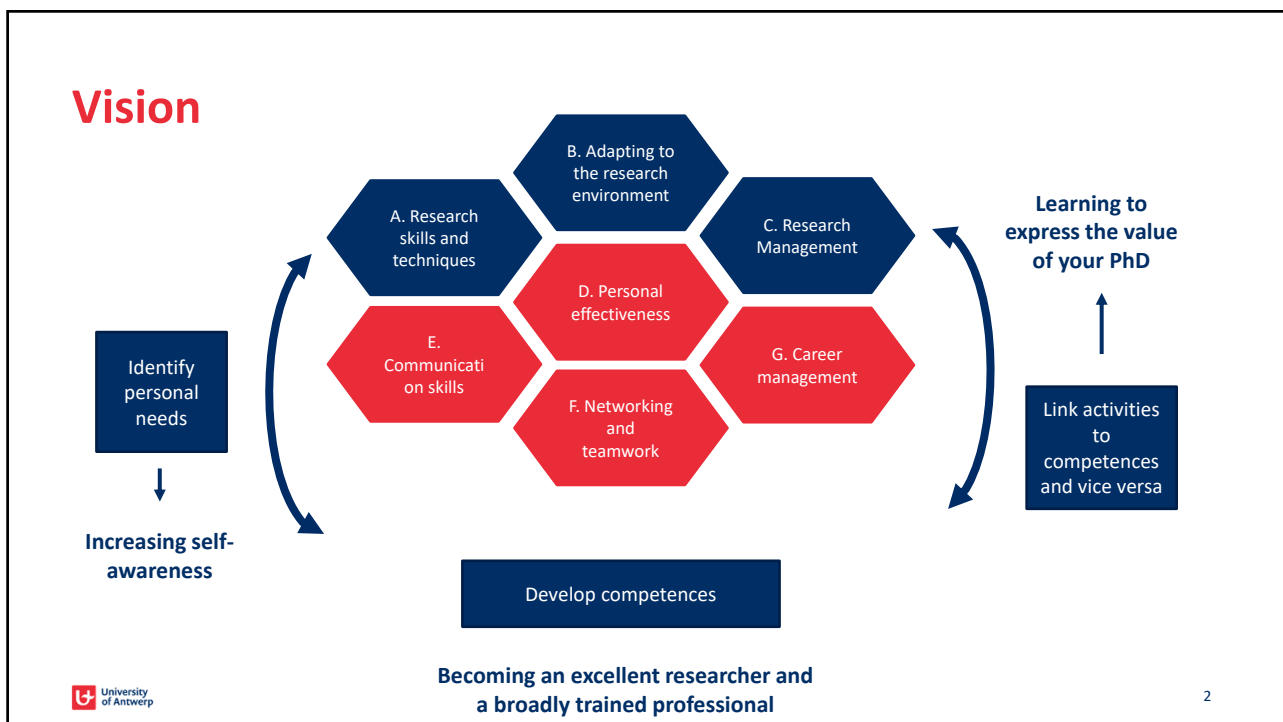


Personal development as a PhD researcher

Dr Karla Tersago

ADS Doctoral Day
16 & 17 October 2025

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To think about...

1. How can you become an excellent researcher?
 2. How can you become a widely employable professional?
 3. What do you want to do after finishing your PhD?
-
- Which skills and competences do you need to develop to make this possible?
 - Which of those can you develop during your PhD?



Almost 90% of PhD holders build a career beyond academia

[LERU position paper – June 2018](#)

Your possible career path beyond academia



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The importance of Personal Development

- Competence development
 - Improving skills and experience
 - Growth
- AS IS -> TO BE
- Professional goal(s)

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Where are you now?



➤ SWOT analysis



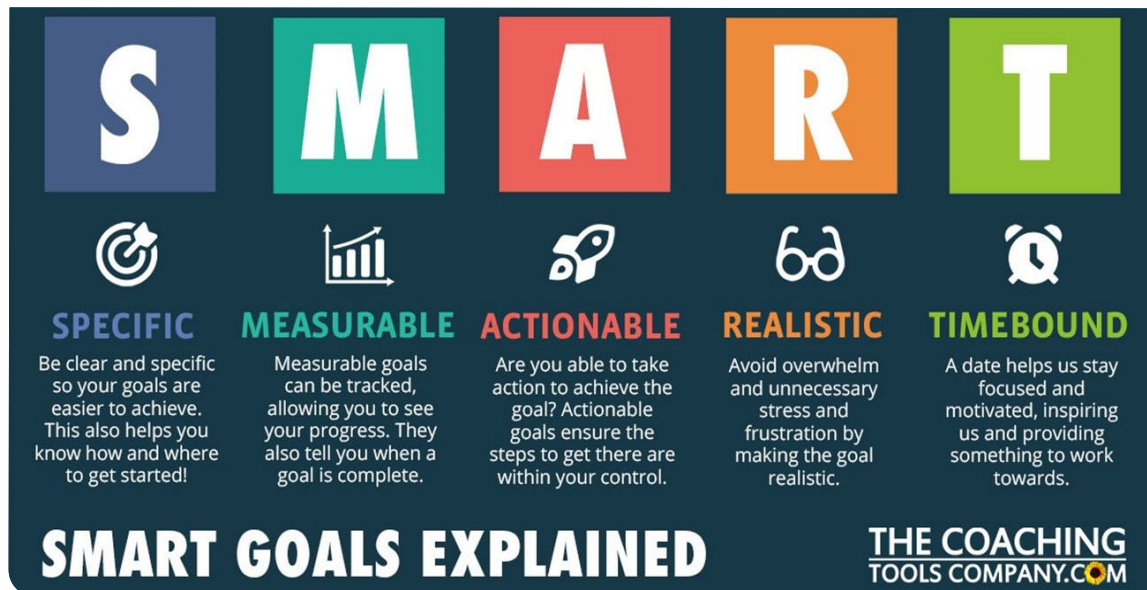
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Why setting professional goals?



- Productivity
- Knowing where to start
- Clearer focus
- Practicing a growth mindset
- A sense of purpose

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Competence profile

A. Research skills & techniques

- **Knowledge** (e.g. subject knowledge, research methods, data-analysis)
- **Cognitive abilities** (e.g. creativity, critical thinking, analysing problems, evaluating research)

B. Research environment

- **Professional conduct** (e.g. ethical code and legal requirements, health and safety guidelines, guidelines regarding authorship,...)
- **Funding and evaluation of research**
- Understanding **publication and valorisation processes**

C. Research management

- **Project planning** (e.g. setting goals, prioritisation)
- **Information seeking** (e.g. use of bibliographical resources)
- **Information literacy and management** (e.g. database management)

D. Personal effectiveness

- **Personal qualities** (e.g. inquiring mind, perseverance, innovative thinking)
- **Self-confidence and self-awareness**
- **Result-oriented focus** (e.g. strive for a publication)

E. Communication skills

- **Academic literacy** (e.g. learning to adapt your writing for the purpose and audience)
- **Communication methods** (e.g. learning to articulate ideas clearly using different techniques)
- **Teaching in higher education**
- **Public engagement** (e.g. popularizing science communication)

F. Teamwork & networking

- **Teamwork**
- **Networking** (within the institution and the wider research community)

G. Career management

- **Continuing professional development**
- **Career management and employability**
- **Transferability of skills**
- **Job interview skills**

Personal Development Plan (PDP): Template

1

My Personal Development Plan - PDP

The goal of this document is to describe your goals as concretely as possible, as well as the actions needed to reach these goals. Below you can find some tips to get you started.

- Make use of the **SMART** principles when defining your development goals:

Specific	Describe your goal clearly and make it very concrete. The six w-questions can help you in doing that: what, whom, where, when, why, which? For behavioural changes: describe behaviour that is observable, as if you could record it with a video camera. It has to be an observable action, behaviour or result.
Measurable	How can you measure that your goal is reached?
Action oriented	The goal has to be an invitation to action and call up on your energy. There has to be an action plan. Describe the result, not the effort. The goal should be formulated in a positive manner. E.g. Don't: I am not going to yell at him. Do: I will stay peaceful and tell my story calmly and constructively (behaviour: normal tone of voice, smiling, ...).
Realistic	Is the goal realistic but challenging enough? Is there an executable, actionable plan with an acceptable level of effort? Can you personally influence the defined goal?
Timing	Define a clear start date and finishing date. When will you start? What is the frequency of action? When is your goal reached? Tip: plan it in your agenda.

- Reflections before getting started:
 - Past:** Where are you coming from? Which path did you already follow? How did this go in the past?
 - Current situation:** Where are you today? What did you already learn?
 - Future:** Where do you want to go? What are your next steps? What are your long term goals?

2

My Personal Development Plan (PDP)

Empty template PDP

3

My Personal Development Plan - PDP

Extra tips: how can you positively impact the chances that you will reach your goal?

- Make use of the PDP document in a positive way when it is really valuable for you. Use it as a working document.
- Plan the follow-up of your development goals, keeping points in your calendar.
- Share this document with a colleague, mentor, buddy, coach, supervisor so they can support you.
- Dealing with setbacks: Through trial and error, it is perfectly normal that you experience setbacks. If it does not go as expected, start over again at the next opportunity.
- Intermediate monitoring of your goals: Some questions that can help you get started:
 - What are the progress steps for the goal you are working on?
 - What elements, barriers/blocks make you get this far? How can you further...
 - What are the feedback/feedbacks you came across? What are you learning...
 - Split your final goal into reachable smaller, intermediate steps.
 - What are your next steps, the follow-up for reaching your ultimate goal?

Some extra tips

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My Personal Development Plan - PDP – example of a concrete development goal (exact sciences)

Below you can find an example of a personal development plan (PDP) that can help you to get started on getting your own goal clarified and get you into action.

- Reflections before getting started:
 - Past:** As a master student, I took the time to combine the work for the sailing school with his studies and he managed quite well to do this.
 - Current situation:** At present, I feel a need to have less time responsibilities and want to take the overview. He doesn't want to take the time to do the important things.
 - Future:** We want to finish his PhD successfully and that means he has to find a way to keep the overview, set priorities and not lose sight of his work.

What is your personal goal?

Describe as concretely as possible when you consider your development goal reached:

When will you start? When will you finish? What is the frequency of action? When is your goal reached? Tip: plan it in your agenda.

Actions:

What is the first action? (including actions do you undertake to reach your goal? Along the way you will have to adjust your plan.)

When will you start? When will you finish? What is the frequency of action? When is your goal reached? Tip: plan it in your agenda.

Reflections:

What is the first reflection? (including reflections do you undertake to reach your goal? Along the way you will have to adjust your plan.)

When will you start? When will you finish? What is the frequency of action? When is your goal reached? Tip: plan it in your agenda.

Example of a concrete PDP for a PhD researcher

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My Personal Development Plan - PDP

The goal of this document is to describe your goals as concretely as possible, as well as the actions needed to reach these goals. Below you can find some tips to get you started.

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Realistic	Is the goal realistic but challenging enough? Is there an executable, actionable plan with an acceptable level of effort? Can you personally influence the defined goals?
Timing	Define a clear start date and finishing date. When will you start? What is the frequency of action? When is your goal reached? Tip: plan it in your agenda.

- Reflections before getting started:
 - Past:** Where are you coming from? Which path did you already follow? How did this go in the past?
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Goals SMART principles Reflections before getting started

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My Personal Development Plan (PDP)

Name: _____ Date: _____			
What is your concrete (professional) goal?	Describe as concretely as possible when you consider your goal reached.		Formulated using the SMART principle?
			☐ Specific ☐ Measurable ☐ Actionable ☐ Realistic
Deadline	When do you want to have your goal reached? What is the deadline? If applicable: in case of habitual changes: for frequency of your actions: see action plan below		☐ Time bound -> Planned in your agenda?
Action plan	Actions Which (multiple / recurring) actions do you undertake to reach your goal? <i>(Adapt the amount of actions in function of your needs.)</i>	Resources What do you need to complete these actions? Which resources and support do you need? Who can support you to complete these actions? In what way?	Timing / frequency ☐ Time bound How often/frequently do you need to follow up on these actions? -> Planned in your agenda?
	Action 1:	Resources:	Frequency:
	Action X:	Resources:	Frequency:
Possible roadblocks	What (or who) keeps you from doing this? What keeps you from taking action? (Competences - 'can I?', Knowledge? - 'do I know enough?', Motivation - 'do I want to?', Fear? - 'do I dare to?') How can you prevent and/or overcome this? (If I..., then I will...)		
Plan B	In what cases would you need to revise/reformulate your goal? What alternative goal do you have in mind?		



2
Empty template PDP

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My Personal Development Plan - PDP

Extra tips: how can you positively impact the chances that you will reach your goals?

- Make sure the PDP document is stored in a place where it is easily reachable so you can use it as a 'working document'.
 - Plan the follow up of your development goals, learning points in your calendar.
 - Share this document with a colleague, mentor, buddy, coach, supervisor so they can support you and give you feedback.
- ☐ **Dealing with setbacks. Through trial and error.** It is perfectly normal that you experience some setbacks, it can't go well every day. Look at it as a learning process. If it does not go as expected, start over again at the next opportunity.
- ☐ **Intermediate monitoring of your goals.** Some questions that can help you get started:
 - ☐ What is my level of progress? How far along am I in reaching my goals?
 - ☐ What elements, (success) factors made you get this far? How can you further strengthen this effect?
 - ☐ What were the bottlenecks/roadblocks you came across? What was standing between you and your goal? How can you avoid this in the future?
 - ☐ Split your final goal into reachable smaller, intermediate steps.
 - ☐ What are your next steps, the follow-up for reaching your ultimate goal?



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Some extra tips

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Personal Development Plan: Template



My Personal Development Plan - PDP – example of a concrete development goal (exact sciences)

Below you can find an example of a personal development plan (PDP) that can help you to get started on getting your own goals clarified and get you into action.

- Reflections before getting started:
 - Past:** As a master student, Tarik (he/him/his) combined the work for the sailing school with his studies and he managed quite well to do this.
 - Current situation:** At present, Tarik seems to have too much responsibilities and seems to lose the overview. He doesn't always take the time to do the important things.
 - Future:** He wants to finish his PhD successfully and that means he has to find a way to keep the overview, set priorities and understand which things he has to do when.

What is your concrete goal?	Describe as concretely as possible when you consider your development goal reached.	Formulated using the SMART principles?
Specific	Tarik wants to learn to set priorities, by gaining insight into time management principles. He wants to focus on the important tasks, so he will be able to finish his PhD successfully, give timely feedback to students, has his poster ready in time for (international) conferences, has his publications ready in time...	
Measurable	When he is able to keep the overview and set priorities, he knows he has achieved his goal: - Meeting deadlines, drop of stress level because of good time management, clear view on priorities, students don't have to wait for feedback as long as they used to - Certificate of participation to ADS course	
Action oriented	see next box / Realistic: all the above is realistic (following a course, scheduling (regular) meetings), finding a buddy... / Timebound: Start next week and attain goal by December 2020.	
Action plan	Which actions do I undertake to reach my goal? In case of behavioural change: in which context, situation is this applicable? What am I going to do differently? If I ... then I will...	
Resources	What do you need to reach this goal? To be able to grow which resources and support do you need? Who can support you to attain your goal? In what way?	

Template PDP – version 24.05.2024 – Talent Center University of Antwerp



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Example of a concrete PDP for a PhD researcher



Frequency/Deadline	Does this require a one-shot action? What is the deadline? In case of behavioural change: At what frequency do you take action? Weekly? Bi-weekly? Monthly? At each meeting with person x?	Planned in your agenda?
	- Meeting will be scheduled before the end of the week. - Frequency of meetings with supervisor: bi-weekly - Frequency of meetings with buddy: monthly - Timing of course: asap, if possible before summer in May or June	
Plan B	What can go wrong and how will you react? Go about it? If I ... then I will...	
Possible roadblocks	When Tarik notices he does not succeed in meeting the deadlines, giving timely feedback to students, ... → re-evaluate planning, re-evaluate priorities, he seeks support within his research group, e.g. asks feedback from buddy and supervisor, identifies where it went wrong through self-reflection. If this would not be enough, then he will seek one-on-one support, e.g. personal coaching on personal effectiveness.	

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Recap: what to do?

Reflection on your professional goal

SWOT analysis of your competences and skills

Reflection on how to develop your competences

Personal Development Plan – as concrete as possible!

Talk about it (with your promotor, colleagues, friends, family, ...)

Reflect and adjust

A first step in your career development!



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Personal Development Plan: Template



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Let's get started on your own personal development plan

- **Pick one competence that's relevant for you:**
 - Why do you want to work on this competence?
 - Past – present – future
- **Use the PDP-template**
 - Can you describe a goal related to this as SMART as possible?
 - What actions do you need to take (e.g. register for a course, talk with ... , ...)?
 - When do you plan to do that? Once or recurring?
 - Are there any other resources you can think of?
 - Is there somebody else who knows more about this?
 - What do you need to really do this? Do you foresee possible roadblocks?
 - ...

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What after today?



Next steps

- Make your **SWOT**-analysis
- Define your **professional goal**
- Develop **your PDP** and focus on the competences you need
- Discuss it with your **supervisor/mentor/buddy/...**
- Plan **reflection time** in your schedule

More information

- More support needed?
 - ADS course 'My Personal Development Plan as a PhD Researcher'
- ADS Website: www.uantwerpen.be/ads (NL/Eng)
- Talent Center: <https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/projects/talent-center-early-career-research/>
- PhD Talent Pool Flanders: <https://phd-talents-be.jobteaser.com/>

The Talent Center





 University of Antwerp