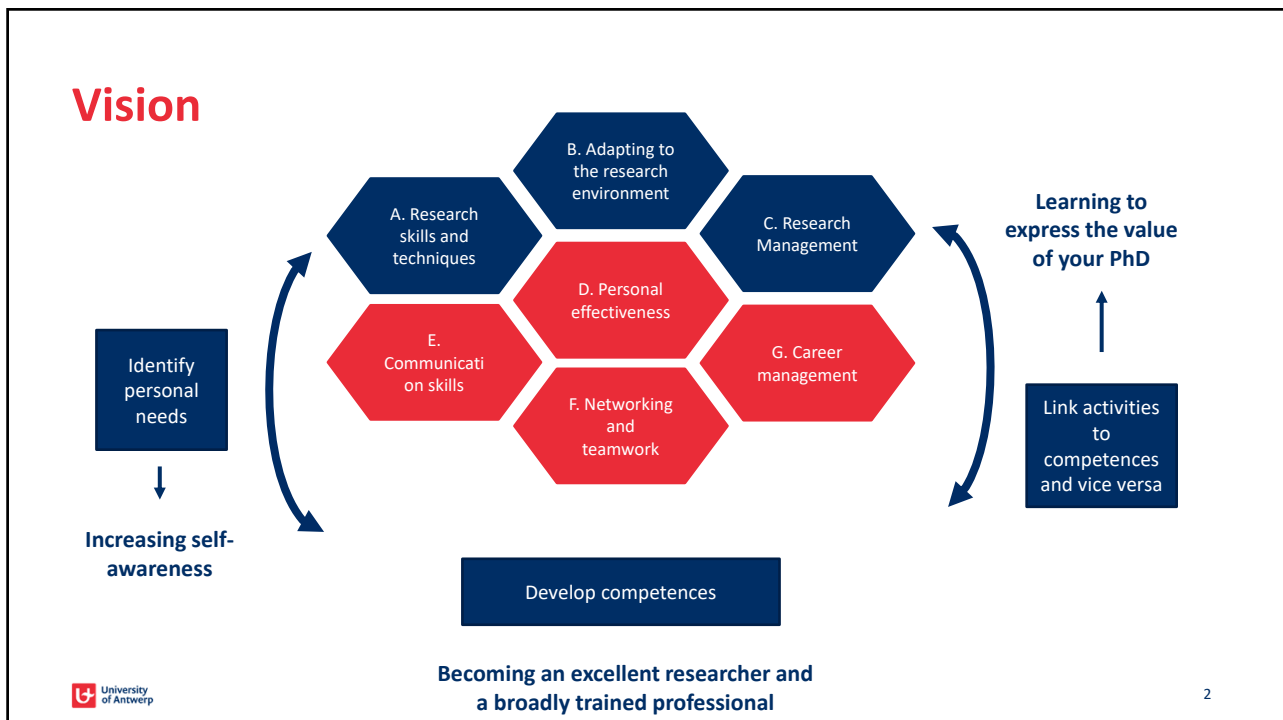


Personal development as a PhD researcher

Dr Karla Tersago

ADS Doctoral Day
19 & 20 October 2026

1



2

Where do you want your PhD to take you?

Research Excellence

- How can you become an excellent researcher?

Career Readiness

- How can you become a widely employable professional?

Future Direction

- What do you want to do after your PhD?

Then work backwards:

- Which competences do you need?
- Which competences can you develop during your PhD?



**88% of the PhD holders
build a career beyond
academia**

[LERU position paper – June 2018](#)

Why invest in your development?



- Most PhD graduates build careers beyond academia
Transferable skills are critical for long-term employability and career mobility. [\[1\]](#), [\[2\]](#)



- 38 studies link development to wellbeing and success
Autonomy, support, and competence development are key predictors of doctoral success. [\[3\]](#)



- Self-awareness and confidence can be developed
Professional development programs strengthen resilience and researcher identity. [\[4\]](#)



The importance of Personal Development

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



How to start?

- Past
- Present
- Future

7



Where are you now?

➤ SWOT analysis



8

Where do you want to go?

Take into account your past,
your personal context, your values,
your strengths and your interests

then determine where you want to go:
what would success look like for you?



Adapted version of The Success Pyramid – source: *How to be a Happy Academic* by Clark & Sousa



Why setting professional goals?

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

The infographic illustrates the SMART goal framework. It consists of five columns, each representing a criterion: Specific (S), Measurable (M), Actionable (A), Realistic (R), and Timebound (T). Each column includes a large letter, an icon, the criterion name in all caps, and a brief explanation. The background is dark blue with colorful squares for each letter. At the bottom, the text 'SMART GOALS EXPLAINED' is written in large white letters, and 'THE COACHING TOOLS COMPANY.COM' is on the right.

S	M	A	R	T
SPECIFIC	MEASURABLE	ACTIONABLE	REALISTIC	TIMEBOUND
Be clear and specific so your goals are easier to achieve. This also helps you know how and where to get started!	Measurable goals can be tracked, allowing you to see your progress. They also tell you when a goal is complete.	Are you able to take action to achieve the goal? Actionable goals ensure the steps to get there are within your control.	Avoid overwhelm and unnecessary stress and frustration by making the goal realistic.	A date helps us stay focused and motivated, inspiring us and providing something to work towards.

SMART GOALS EXPLAINED

THE COACHING TOOLS COMPANY.COM

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

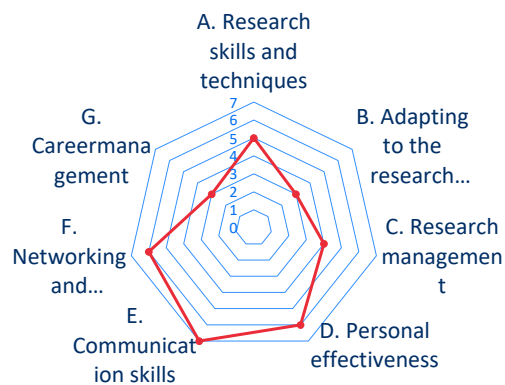
- **Teamwork**
- **Networking** (within the institution and the wider research community)

G. Career management

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

Mapping your situation

- to the ADS competence profile



13



A tool to support your personal development

14



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.
Measureable	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 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.

1

Goals
SMART principles
Reflections before
getting started

- 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?



Template PDP – version 24.05.2024 - Talent Center University of Antwerp

15

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 ☐ Measureable ☐ 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		
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



16

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.
- o **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.
- o **Intermediate monitoring of your goals.** Some questions that can help you get started:
- o What is my level of progress? How far along am I in reaching my goals?
 - o What elements, (success) factors made you get this far? How can you further strengthen this effect?
 - o What were the bottlenecks/roadblocks you came across? What was standing between you and your goal? How can you avoid this in the future?
 - o Split your final goal into reachable smaller, intermediate steps.
 - o What are your next steps, the follow-up for reaching your ultimate goal?

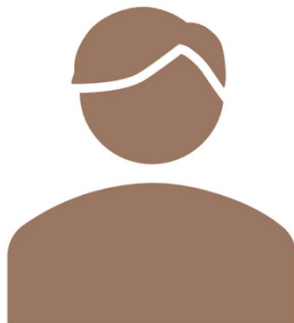
3

Some extra tips

17

Personal Development Plan: Example

Tarik



- **Past:** master student; combined work for the sailing school and studies; managed quite well to do this.
- **Current situation:** seems to have too much responsibilities; seems to lose the overview; doesn't always take the time to do the important things.
- **Future:** wants to finish his PhD successfully
-> has to find a way to keep the overview, set priorities and understand which things to do when.

18



Personal Development Plan: Example

What is his concrete (professional) goal?

▪ Specific:

- wants to learn to set priorities -> gaining insight into time management principles.
- wants to focus on the important tasks:
 - will be able to finish his PhD successfully,
 - give timely feedback to students,
 - has his poster ready in time for (international) conference,
 - has his publications ready in time, ...



Personal Development Plan: Example

▪ Measurable:

he knows he has achieved his goal:

- meets deadlines
- drop of stress level because of good time management;
- clear view on priorities;
- students don't have to wait for feedback
- Certificate of participation to ADS course



Personal Development Plan: Example

- **Action oriented:**

- see ACTION PLAN
- Realistic: all the above is realistic (following a course, scheduling (regular) meeting(s), finding a buddy, ...)

Deadline

- **Time-bound:**

Start next week and attain goal by June 2027.



21



Personal Development Plan: Example

Action 1:

enroll for an ADS course on time management/ personal effectiveness.

- **Resources:**

ADS course on time management/ personal effectiveness (Approval from supervisor)

- **Frequency:**

Asap, if possible before spring in November-January.

ADS courses open at the beginning of every semester of the academic year



22



Personal Development Plan: Example

Action 2:

schedule a meeting with his supervisor to inform him about the fact that he gets really stressed out by the situation.

- **Resources:**

Supervisor: support and feedback.

- **Frequency:**

The meeting will be scheduled before the end of the week.
Proposed frequency of the meeting three-weekly.



23



Personal Development Plan: Example

Action 3:

search a buddy to challenge him

- **Resources:**

Other team members could become his buddy and support and challenge him, give him feedback when needed or asked for

- **Frequency:**

Monthly check-ins



24



Personal Development Plan: Example

Action 4:

Self-reflection moments

- **Resources:**

Calendar overview to see when this fits within his busy schedule.

- **Frequency:**

Monthly



25



Personal Development Plan: Example

Possible roadblocks

- Procrastination behaviour -> plan with extra buffer time
- Lack of motivation: see the long-term advantages of certain tasks
- Not being assertive enough when supervisor gives you an extra assignment: buy time to overthink an extra assignment and make a draft planning to discuss with supervisor



26



Personal Development Plan: Example

Plan B

When he notices he fails in meeting the deadlines, giving timely feedback to students, ...

- re-evaluate planning
- redefine priorities,
- 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.



27

Personal Development Plan: Template



- Make sure to log in with your UAntwerpen-account



28

28

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

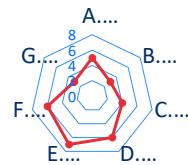
A first step in your career development!



29

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?
 - ...



30

30

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/>

Your possible career path beyond academia



Questions?

