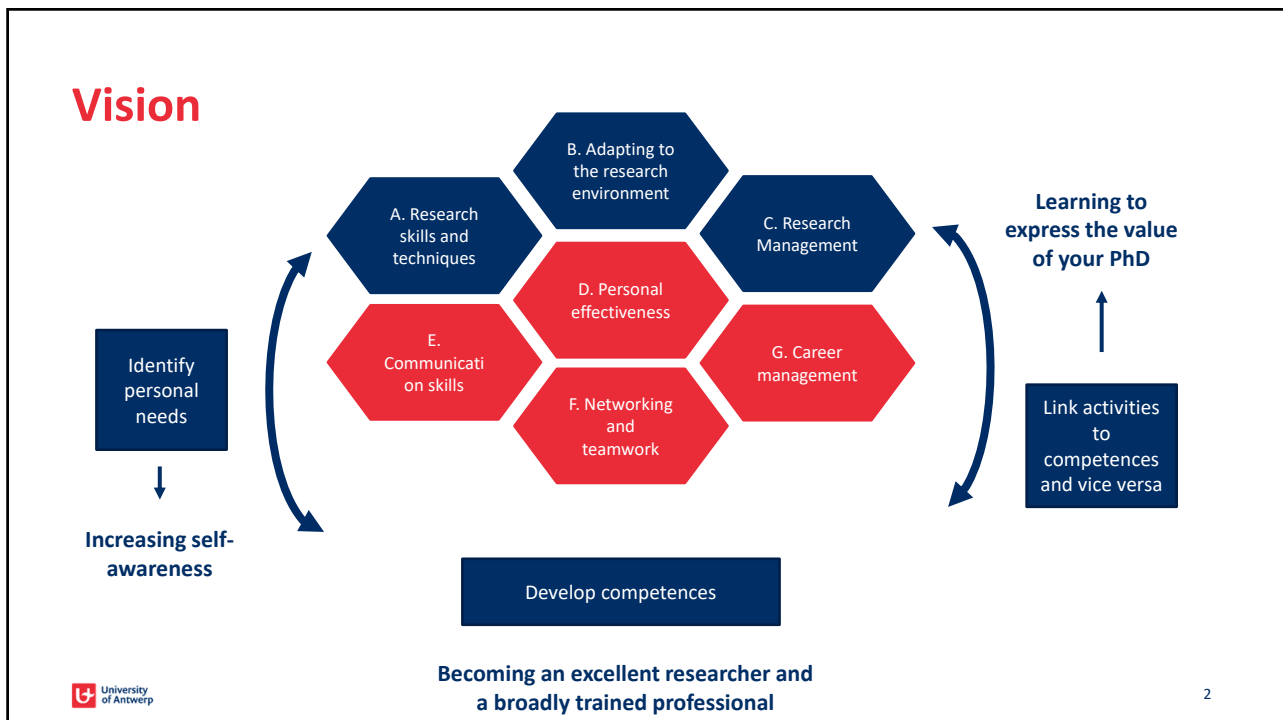


Personal development as a PhD researcher

Dr Karla Tersago

ADS Doctoral Day
19 March 2026

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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](#)



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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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

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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**



<https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/centres/antwerp-doctoral-school/doctoral-study-programme/>

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. Before 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. This is in questions can help you in the behavioural design: describe behaviour that is observable, as if you could measure it (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 not an end in itself. The goal should be formulated in a positive manner. (e.g. 'Don't be an irresponsible behaviour' instead of 'avoid irresponsible...')

Realistic: Is the goal realistic but challenging enough? Is there an executable, active plan 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? (If applicable, state clearly).

Reflections before getting started:

- **EQ1:** Where are you coming from? Which path did you already follow? How did this go in the past?
- **EQ2:** Current situation: where are you today? What did you already do?
- **EQ3:** Where do you want to go? What are your next steps? What are your long-term goals?

Goals SMART principles Reflections before getting started

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My Personal Development Plan (PDP)

Name: _____ Date: _____

What is your overall (professional) goal?	Describe as concretely as possible when you consider your goal reached.	Formulated using the SMART principles?
Deadline:	When do you want to have your goal reached? What is the deadline? If applicable, list at least 3 concrete and measurable steps you intend to take before.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not sure
Actions plan:	What (multiple) learning activities do you anticipate to reach your goal? What are the expected results (division of your work)?	Reflections: What do you need to complete these actions? What resources will support this action? What can support you to complete these actions?
Action 1:	Response:	Reflections: Is the frequency of action?
Action 2:	Response:	
Action 3:	Response:	
Final reflection:	What did you learn from doing this? What steps do you have in mind? (competences: 'EQ1', 'Knowledge', 'EQ2', 'EQ3', 'EQ4', 'EQ5', 'EQ6', 'EQ7', 'EQ8', 'EQ9', 'EQ10', 'EQ11', 'EQ12', 'EQ13', 'EQ14', 'EQ15', 'EQ16', 'EQ17', 'EQ18', 'EQ19', 'EQ20')	
Final goal:	When will you reach your goal? (date)	
Final reflection:	When will you reach your goal? (date)	
Final reflection:	When will you reach your goal? (date)	

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 goal?

- Make sure the PDP document is stored in a place where it is easily reachable so you can use it as a working document.
- Place the follow-up of your development goals, learning points in your calendar.
- Share this document with colleagues, mentors, family, coach, supervisor or others who can support you in reaching your goal.
- **Working with reflections:** Through this tool you will be perfectly aware of the experience you have in doing so and as a result, start over again at the next opportunity.
- **Intermediate monitoring of your goals:** Some questions that can help you get started:
 - What are your current goals? How do they fit in your long-term goals?
 - What activities, resources, events, people, etc. do you need to reach your goals?
 - What are the barriers/obstacles you come across? What are your strengths?
 - How can you deal with these barriers/obstacles, weaknesses, etc.?
 - 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 in getting your own goals defined and put into action.

Reflections before getting started:

- **EQ1:** As a former student, I have been able to continue the work for the last 10 years with the quality and the support of the university. I have been able to do this because of the support of the university and the support of the university.
- **EQ2:** In the current situation, I have been able to continue the work for the last 10 years with the quality and the support of the university. I have been able to do this because of the support of the university and the support of the university.
- **EQ3:** I want to finish the PhD successfully and that means I have to find a way to keep the overview, set priorities and manage my time.

What is your overall (professional) goal?

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

Formulated using the SMART principles?

Yes () No () Not sure ()

Deadline:

When do you want to have your goal reached? What is the deadline? If applicable, list at least 3 concrete and measurable steps you intend to take before.

Actions plan:

What (multiple) learning activities do you anticipate to reach your goal? What are the expected results (division of your work)?

Reflections: What do you need to complete these actions? What resources will support this action? What can support you to complete these actions?

Final reflection: What did you learn from doing this? What steps do you have in mind? (competences: 'EQ1', 'Knowledge', 'EQ2', 'EQ3', 'EQ4', 'EQ5', 'EQ6', 'EQ7', 'EQ8', 'EQ9', 'EQ10', 'EQ11', 'EQ12', 'EQ13', 'EQ14', 'EQ15', 'EQ16', 'EQ17', 'EQ18', 'EQ19', 'EQ20')


Final goal: When will you reach your goal? (date)

Final reflection: When will you reach your goal? (date)

Final reflection: When will you reach your goal? (date)

Example of a concrete PDP for a PhD researcher





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

- **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?

Goals
SMART principles
Reflections before
getting started


Template PDP – version 24.05.2024 - Talent Center University of Antwerp


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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.		
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		Formulated using the SMART principle? <input type="checkbox"/> Specific <input type="checkbox"/> Measureable <input type="checkbox"/> Actionable <input type="checkbox"/> Realistic <input type="checkbox"/> 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 <input type="checkbox"/> 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

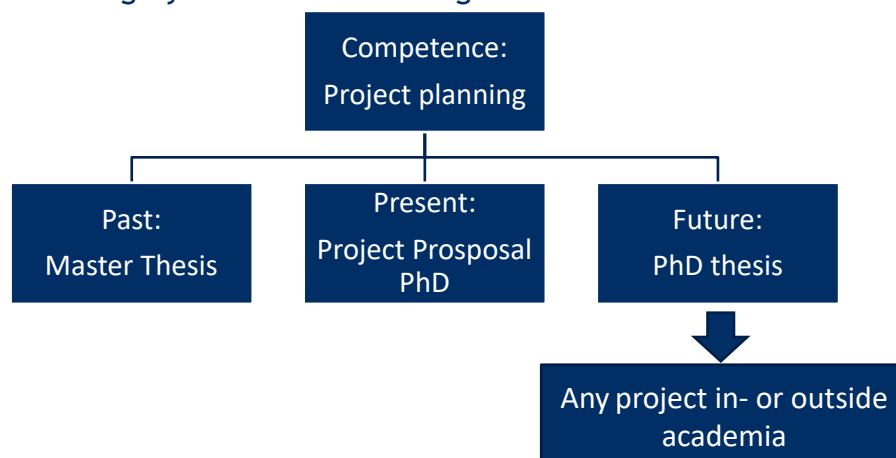
Extra tips: how can you positively impact the chances that you will reach your goals?

- 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.
- 3 Some extra tips
- **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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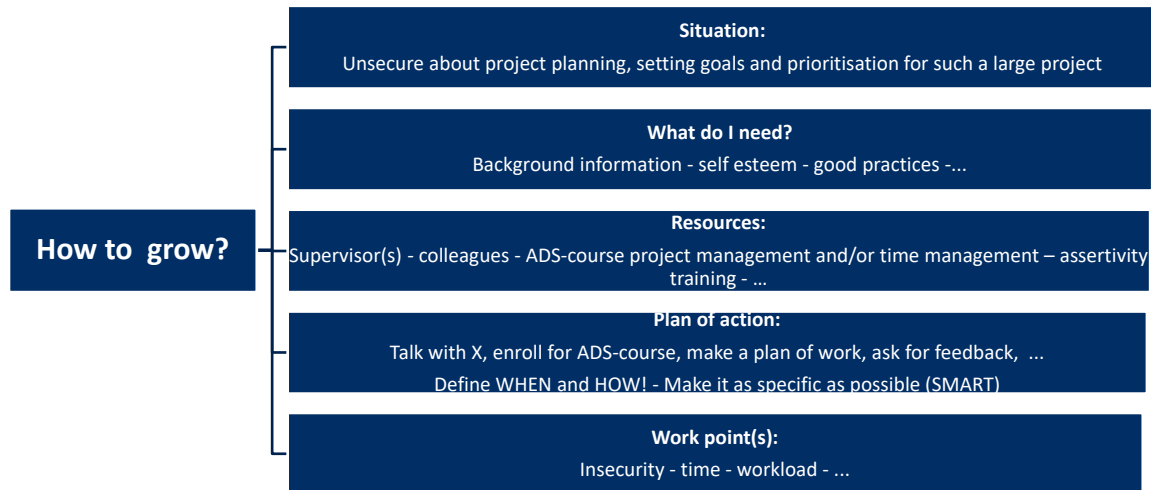
An example – The Personal Development Plan: part 1

Competence category: C. Research Management



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An example – The Personal Development Plan: part 2



Personal Development Plan: Template

4 Example of a concrete PDP for a PhD researcher

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 principle?
	<p>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) conference, has his publications ready in time,...</p> <p>Measurable: When he is able to keep the overview and set priorities, he knows he has achieved his goal:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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 <p>Action oriented: see next box / Realistic: all the above is realistic (following a course, scheduling (regular) meetings), finding a buddy, ... / Time-bound: Start next week and attain goal by December 2020.</p>	
Action plan	<p>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 not, then I will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> He will enroll for an ADS course on time management/ personal effectiveness. He will schedule a meeting with his supervisor to inform him about the fact that he gets really stressed out by the situation. He will propose that he discusses the priorities, ... on a regular basis with his supervisor. He will search a buddy to challenge him and meet them on a regular basis. He will plan follow-up moments in his agenda for self-reflection. 	
Resources	<p>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?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ADS course on time management/ personal effectiveness (approval from supervisor) Supervisor support & feedback Other team members could become his buddy and support and challenge him, give him feedback when needed or asked for 	

Template PDP – version 24.05.2024 - Talent Center University of Antwerp

Frequency/Deadline	Does this require a one-off action? What is the deadline? In case of behavioural change, do what frequency do you take action? Weekly? Bi-weekly? Monthly? At each meeting with person x?	Planned in your agenda?
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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	<p>What can go wrong and how will you react? Go about it? If ... then I will ...</p> <p>When Tarik notices he does not succeed in meeting the deadlines, giving timely feedback to students, ... => re-evaluate planning, redefine priorities, he seeks support within his research group, e.g. also feedback from buddy and supervisor, identifies where it went wrong through self-reflection. If this would not be enough, then he will seek someone support, e.g. personal coaching on personal effectiveness.</p>	
Possible roadblocks	<p>What keeps you from doing this? What keeps you from taking action? (Competence - 'can I?', Knowledge - 'do I know enough?', Motivation - 'do I want to?', Fear - 'do I dare to?') If ... then I will ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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 	

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?
 - ...

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



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