

A series of short articles on
The Role of Academic Institutions in Educating and Training
Project Managers¹

Article 4 of 6

**Managing A Blind Date With Knowledge - Interdisciplinary
PM Education Tailored for Doctoral Students**

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Pursuing a PhD program, in any field of enquiry, can be a long and lonesome journey. First comes extensive coursework and qualifying exams. Then the PhD candidate has to propose a sound research project and define how he or she will use any of the range of sophisticated research methods available to explore certain aspects of reality, and deliver outcomes that will hold up to the scrutiny of experts in the field. The process and the quality of the outcome depend, to a large extent, on the candidate's own ability to self-motivate and self-manage. The completion of a successful PhD degree is traditionally seen as an indication of a strong character who has stayed focused and succeeded in managing a personal project of collective value.

Based on the above, wouldn't it be beneficial to define, plan and manage a PhD research project according to project management principles? We believe that seeing a PhD project as a project from the beginning and applying project management methods and project leadership approaches would greatly increase the likelihood of a successful outcome.

The whole undertaking of a PhD degree and accompanying research project fits well some of the necessary criteria for a *project* in project management terms. It is time-bound, with a definite beginning and end; it is constrained by financial resources; it has an organisational structure which consists of the candidate, the academic advisor, the PhD committee, and the University; it brings about a change by answering particular research questions and/or by solving a problem; and it depends on a multitude of environmental factors and information that the candidate needs to acquire, process and use for the benefit of his/her project. Further, a PhD project draws on the contribution of scholars who have dealt with the same or similar topics. It can also be based on the collective contribution of number of parties, as the candidate may be a member of a research group or may rely on the direct or indirect contribution of few or many people. Overall, the PhD project is also supposed to yield results that should make a difference;

¹This series of articles is by Professors Helgi Thor Ingason and Haukur Ingi Jonasson at Reykjavik University in Iceland. Active researchers and educators in the field of project management for many years, they are the authors of *Project Ethics* published by Gower (UK) in 2013. See their author profiles at the end of this article.

it should make an authentic contribution to the academic/scientific field within which it falls.

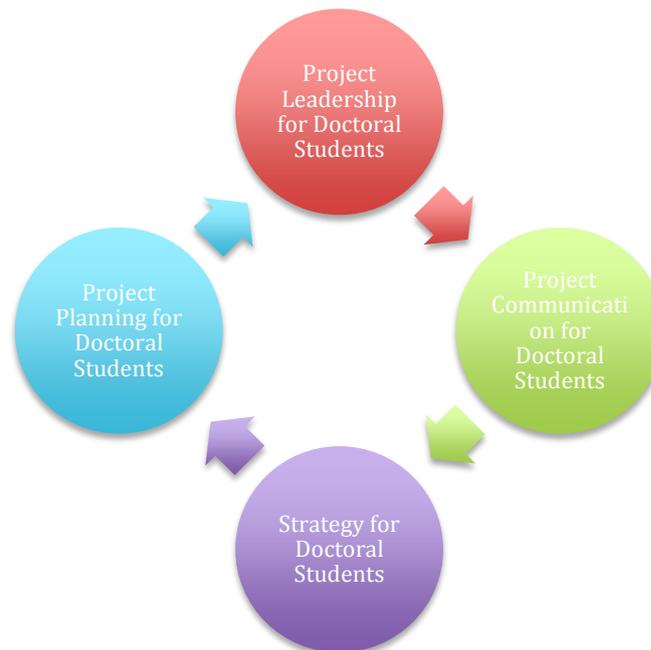
So, from a project management perspective, what kind of projects are PhD research projects? They can, in fact, be projects with considerable uncertainties; the research methods might vary and research findings can be obscure. We can apply to PhD projects the classification proposed by Turner and Payne², which defines four different types of projects, based on two dimensions, depending on whether project goals and project methods are well or poorly defined. According to this framework, a typical PhD research project would probably fall under the definition of an “air project”, where neither the project goals nor the project management methods are—at least not at the outset—very well defined. And even though a decent attempt has been made to define both goals and methods in the research proposal, the research might demand all kinds of minor or major alterations along the way. It is, therefore, necessary to tailor the planning and control procedures to meet the needs of the individual project type. Some PhD research projects indicate high management complexity: the project may entail drastic changes along the way; there may be many and unpredictable conditions; the outcome may be reached by many and partly unknown means; and the meaning or practicality of the project results might be hard to define.

In our conversations with PhD candidates we noticed a few common trends:

- 1) many PhD students were lonely,
- 2) many of them had not been exposed to interdisciplinary thinking and were hence somewhat narrow-minded; for instance, many students in science and technology had hardly been exposed to the humanities and social sciences and *vice versa*,
- 3) many PhD students struggled with managing their time,
- 4) many PhD students struggled with managing the relationship with their academic advisors,
- 5) many of them had no idea how they were going to use their expertise to gain influence and earn an income,
- 6) there was an overall lack of project management and project leadership knowledge.

To help PhD students at the University of Iceland tackle all of the above issues, we designed a special program for PhD candidates. The program was a condensed version of our "Transparent Leadership and Sustainable Project Management" program (see article no. 3 in this series), tailored however to the immediate needs of young researchers and their future needs as leaders in society.

²H Payne, J., & Rodney Turner, J. (1999). Company-wide project management: the planning and control of programs of projects of different type. *International Journal of Project Management*, 17(1), 55-59.



The interdisciplinary program included four 2 ECTS credit courses (see picture) that doctoral students could take interchangeably, as they wanted, and when they wanted. The *project leadership* course focused on leadership within an academic context, such as in teaching, academic coaching, academic operations, and in managing research projects. The emphasis was on self-reflection and self-management. In the course on *project communication*, the candidates developed their skills in interpersonal communication, people management, negotiation, conflict and crisis management. The course on *strategy* focused on values, mission, and future vision, goals and objectives. The course on *project planning* dealt with the skills involved in defining, planning, executing, controlling and finishing a research project.

The program was open to all doctoral students in Iceland. However, in order to receive the credits as part of their academic work, students needed to consult their academic advisor and their department at the university. Each course was taught as two one-day modules separated by one week, and held each semester. In addition, the program was designed in accordance with the professional certification system of the International Project Management Association (IPMA), and participants had the option to undergo basic certification (Certified Project Management Associate - D level certification), as part of the program.

In our experience, the program strengthened the doctoral students' ability to accomplish their academic objectives and also fostered interdisciplinary interest and cooperation among them - something that we hope they will then bring out to the research community. Based on our very rewarding experience of running the program for groups of very grateful PhD students, we suggest that a project management/leadership program of this sort should be, if not mandatory, then at least an option for all PhD students in all fields of study. A program of this sort enables PhD

candidates to expand, grow and develop in an interdisciplinary haven, along with their PhD work supervised by an academic advisor.

It is fitting to end with the title of this article, which was inspired by a quote attributed to William Henry³, "What is research but a blind date with knowledge?" A PhD project is, in fact, "a blind date with knowledge" and the unexpected. It might, however, be wise to prepare even for "blind dates" and their surprises. We should not only ask: What is your research project? What is your method? But also: What is your future strategy? What are your resources? What will be your tactics? What are your managerial tools? How will you self-manage? How will you communicate with others, etc. By thinking through the possible courses of action beforehand, you can take some control. And by knowing beforehand what you intend to achieve, you will increase your chances of success.

³ A British chemist, 1775-1836.

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Helgi Thor Ingason (b. 1965) holds a PhD in process metallurgy from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), MSc in mechanical and industrial engineering from the University of Iceland and a Stanford Advanced Project Management Certification from Stanford University. He is an IPMA Certified Senior Project Manager (B level).

Dr. Ingason is a professor at Reykjavik University. He is the head of the MPM - Master of Project Management - program at the university. The research fields of Dr. Ingason range from quality- and project management to system dynamics and renewable energy, production, transport and utilization, changes in the energy infrastructure and energy carriers of the future.

Dr. Ingason has reported on his research at conferences and in several reviewed conference and journal papers. He is the co-author of 6 books in the Icelandic language on project management, strategic planning, product development and quality management. He is also a co-author (with Dr Haukur Ingi Jonasson) of the book *Project Ethics*, published by Gower in January 2013.

Dr. Ingason was interim CEO of Orkuveita Reykjavíkur (Reykjavik Energy) from 2010 to 2011. A co-founder of Nordica Consulting Group, Dr. Ingason is a management consultant and a recognized speaker. In his spare time he plays piano and accordion with Icelandic jazz and world music ensembles. More information on Dr. Ingason can be found on www.academia.edu. Information about the MPM program at the University of Reykjavik can be found at <http://en.ru.is/mpm/why-mpm/>.

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He is also a psychoanalyst in private practice and a management consultant at Nordic Consulting Group ehf. As a consultant, his clients have included energy companies, banks, hospitals, the government and other public and private organizations. Dr. Jonasson is also a mountain climber and a member of the Reykjavik Mountaineering Air Ground Search and Rescue Squad. He is co-author with Helgi Thor Ingason of *Project Ethics*, published by Gower (UK) in 2013.

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