



University of Salford
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Supplementary Skills for Built Environment Researchers

*Guide to personal development,
professional competence, judgement and
confidence*

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**Postgraduate
training in
Built and Human
Environment**



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Introduction

This guide to paper/report writing skills for Built Environment researchers is prepared to provide some tips on how to enhance your skills and competence during your course of study. This is an outcome of a Centre for Education in Built Environment (CEBE) funded project, called SuSi-BER (Supplementary Skills for Built Environment Researchers) conducted within the Research Institute for the Built & Human Environment, the University of Salford.

There have been repeated calls for enhancing research and supplementary skills of the built environment researchers. Few would disagree that deepening specialised knowledge-base and wider skills of researchers in a variety of disciplines are prerequisite for developing successful leadership in higher education, the public sector and industry. We believe that, there is ample room for improvement in developing supplementary skills for quality research and researchers in the built environment. Further, as the modern society is changing in an unprecedented pace, you as an individual might realise the need to develop skills and competencies on a continual basis.

In this context, the project has been focusing on creating a foundation for creating, developing, and exploiting knowledge of supplementary skills for various activities of the built environment researchers. The project has identified and classified generic and transferable skills under the following six broad themes.

- paper / report writing skills;
- communication and presentation skills;
- personal development, professional competence, judgement and confidence;
- planning, organising, and time management;
- critical thinking and problem solving; and,
- team work and leadership.

There would be a guideline for each theme and an overall guideline for developing supplementary skills. The guides are written for everyone who is engaged in the Built Environment research, particularly postgraduate researchers reading for academic qualifications, e.g. MSc or PhD.

There is a wealth of information on each topic already available elsewhere, be it written or embedded in practice at various institutions. Due to space limitations, this guide does not provide comprehensive and exhaustive advice on each topic. Instead, this guide will provide some examples and practical tips that can help you to understand what developing each skill entails. It is hoped that this generic guide will stimulate you to think or rethink your chosen course of study as not just acquiring a qualification or passive learning experience of gaining some specialist knowledge on a research topic, but also as a process of developing you as a competent professional who can solve problems and contribute to the body of knowledge during the course of your study as well as for your future career.

This guide is thus intended to provide a foundation for which you can start with and as a common frame of reference to facilitate knowledge sharing among fellow students. For those of you who are interested in exploring further on particular topics, a reading list is provided at the end of each guide. Also remember that these supplementary skills need practice and you will learn through experience as well as reading some good materials. Like learning craft skills, we suggest that, as a starter, you emulate how other model people do and adapt their style and behaviour to suit your particular needs and style.

Personal development, professional competence, judgement, and confidence

The answer sounds trite, but, in today's changing environment, we need to continuously update our own skills, knowledge, and experience to realise one's full potential. In relation to this, Peter Drucker observes (for reference, see Further Reading List)

'Success in the knowledge economy comes to those who know themselves – their strengths, their values, and how they best perform.'

The statement is highly relevant to postgraduate researchers regardless of their chosen career path. Although the goals and objectives of one's study might differ from individual to individual, we all need to take heed of developing oneself during and beyond the course of our studies. The answer to 'How one can actually develop personal and professional skills, competence, and confidence?' will be different as we have different predispositions, traits, desires, and styles. This guide is not therefore attempting to present a single best solution for all postgraduate researchers' needs and capabilities. Instead, it is to present some useful tips and examples of achieving one's full potential.

Do you know where you want to be?

'If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there' (Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*)

When you start your research, you might have specific purpose of your study: be it career progression, starting an academic career, or pure interest in knowing something! Whatever you have in mind, it may change during the course of your study as more opportunities (or even problems) come up, or simply your ambition has been heightened (or be that matter, lowered).

As the opening quote tells us, it is very hard for oneself to manage personal or professional career. The responsibility of managing one's career lies in oneself. This is especially true for today's knowledge workers like you! You have to

assume the responsibility of managing yourself and figure out what or who you want to be, and what your value is for achieving excellence.

Think about five or ten years ahead, and do you know where you want to be? Is it where you can make the greatest contribution? Essentially, this is not just a matter of 'success' but also 'value'. You may be highly successful in an organisational setting, while its value system is not harmonious with yours. Thus, knowing where you want to be requires a deep understanding of how do you rate your own success and what kind of 'value' you would pursue. The two are not necessarily the same and one. Check out the profession or the institution where you want to belong before you realise that your value system is in conflict with theirs or the setting is not the most favourable and conducive for your personal and professional growth.

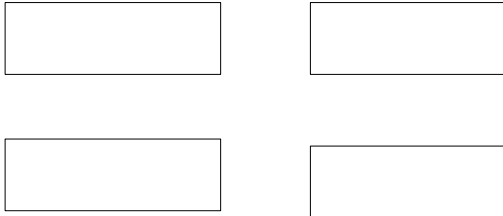
Once you are happy with the place you want to be in the future, try to understand what takes you to get there. This may entail understanding the skills, competences and qualifications the profession or organisation expect from you. Knowing what they want from you is necessary, but not sufficient for you to succeed. The next question you want to ask is, 'where do I stand?'

Do you know where you are?

On the one hand the question 'where I stand?' sounds easy to answer, but on a second thought, as is often the case, this is a very difficult question to answer instantly. In order to answer the question, you have to assess your strengths and weaknesses (and in relation to the future desired status). Knowing your own position and the desired state highlights the gap that you need to fill in. As Watts Humphrey, the founder of the Software Process Program of the Software Engineering Institute (SEI) at Carnegie Mellon University says *'If you don't know where you are, a map won't help.'*

You may want to start from the self-assessment questions listed in the appendix in this guide and other guides. Or, you can construct your own essential and desired skills and competence that will allow you to perform effectively in your current

position. Whatever approach you take, it will be a tantalising experience to expose yourself to both what you are good at and what you are bad at. The following figure shows four rectangles that pose questions leading to your deeper understanding of strengths and weaknesses.



The two left rectangles ask 'what do I know what I am good at?' and 'what don't I know what I am good at?' The answers to these questions might be straightforward to some; however, surprisingly, not many of us do not know exactly what we are good at. Your strengths will become evident if you're forced to do something. You may have some knowledge but you cannot demonstrate your capability until you act upon the knowledge. This means you have to identify opportunities to exploit your strengths and to explore whether you have something that can perform better than you might have thought.

Unlike the left ones, the right rectangles ask whether you know your weaknesses: 'what do I know what I am not good at?' and 'what don't I know what I am not good at?' This is a harder task as you may feel bad. However, knowing what you are not good at allows you to avoid or mitigate problems you may encounter in the future. In order to get an accurate picture of your weaknesses, talk to your colleagues, friends, family or supervisor and get some honest feedback. Unless you know what your weaknesses are, there would be no effective strategy to address them. You may want to develop more skills in what you are not particularly good at or find complementary skills that allow you to overcome your weaknesses.

There are many roads, but...

Knowing where you are now and where you want to be is a first step to develop and manage yourself. Perhaps a less talked about issue is how you are going to address the gap. This is a

complex issue which cannot be fully discussed in this guide, but one suggestion is put forward: know how you perform and learn best.

Some of us perform and learn through by doing. Others may find it easier to read and understand how it works first. Some are working and learning better in a group, whilst others prefer individual task and learning. Some of us enjoy doing multiple tasks at the same time, while others need to have quite place to concentrate on the prioritised tasks.

Try to identify the pattern and rhythm you find most comfortable to develop your skills and competencies. You may want to experiment by changing your particular pattern and rhythm to what you haven't tried before and learn whether you know what's best for you and what's not really for you. Once you identify under what circumstances you perform better and worse, speak to your friends, family, colleagues, or supervisor and seek help. Not everything can be changed for you and your career, but at least you can try to find some alternative ways to perform and learn.

Summary

As a knowledge worker, your learning does not stop when you finish your given postgraduate research. Managing oneself requires one's efforts and energy, but the consequences will be far greater than the input. In the process, you may want to seek your 'role model' as well as to learn through reflection. Equally, as this guide highlights, finding your goal, value, strengths and weaknesses, and opportunities are important to nurture your personal and professional growth. In order to act upon the knowledge, however, you need to understand how you perform and learn best. Identify what is enabling and restraining your performance and devise your own strategy to overcome your weaknesses and to exploit and further strengthen what you're good at. Last, but not the least, have a faith in yourself that you're the master of your personal and professional life!

Further reading list

The following article provides stimulating ideas on

how knowledge workers need to become a CEO of one's own career:

Drucker, P.F. (2005) Managing oneself. *Harvard Business Review*, January, pp. 100-109.

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Appendix: Self-assessment for personal development, professional competence, judgement and confidence

Complete this Skills Audit now and compare progress each year during your PhD. Through this exercise, you would have opportunities to assess your awareness of both strengths and weaknesses. This will form the basis of your supplementary skills profile. Having completed this assessment of your supplementary skills, you may want to set targets for yourself and develop strategy to improve any aspect of the particular supplementary skills. You may want to identify sources of good practice or model which you would like to emulate or learn through experience. Some of the aspects might be discussed during workshop or training sessions in your school, research institute or university, so check with the pertinent websites or student handbook. You may also discuss with your supervisor(s), who can provide you with some help on whether there are opportunities for you to practice your skills.

Rate your ability according to the scale provided as below. As you go through each category, it is useful to think about how you can develop your skills on a short-term as well as long-term basis.

Rating	
4	Very well I feel confident in my ability to use this skill.
3	Satisfactory I am able to use this skill well, but my ability could be further improved.
2	Needs attention My ability to use this skill needs to improve.
1	Needs considerable attention I struggle with this skill and need to put in considerable efforts to develop this skill.

<i>Rate your ability against each statement below:</i>	Rating	Target	Improvement Strategy
I am able to assess my current skills requirements			
I am able to understand and assess my future skills requirements			
I can identify opportunities to develop my skills			
I am able to assess and monitor my progress regularly			
I am able to relate my research to other wider fields of research and practice			
I can understand how my field of research has, or could have, an impact on other disciplines			
I can assess critically my current skills in relation to the needs of potential future employers			
I can identify key researchers within my chosen and/or related fields			
I know requirements of professional bodies where I (want to) belong and comply with them			

<i>Consider your responses above and rate your overall ability for personal development, professional competence, judgement and confidence</i>	Rating	Target	Improvement Strategy
Overall personal development, professional competence, judgement and confidence			

Any problems?

Things I need to improve

Action plan for the next review (set your own review frequency such as quarterly or yearly)