Self-Regulation in the Doctoral Research Context: Exploring Students’ Responses to a Self-Monitoring Process during PhD Candidature

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Statement of Originality

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University’s Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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Table of Contents

1. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY .................................................. 1
   1.1 Introduction ............................................................................. 2
   1.2 Self-regulation and the doctoral research student ..................... 5
   1.3 Self-regulation, self-regulated learning, and metacognition ........... 9
   1.4 Overview of phases and subprocesses of self-regulation .............. 12
   1.5 Significance of this study .................................................... 15
   1.6 Key terms used in this study ................................................. 16
   1.7 Overview of thesis structure .............................................. 17

2. THE SELF-REGULATORY DIMENSIONS OF DOCTORAL RESEARCH .......... 19
   2.1 Introduction ............................................................................. 19
   2.2 Self-regulation as a conceptual framework .............................. 20
   2.3 Forethought phase ............................................................... 21
      2.3.1 Task analysis ........................................................................ 21
      2.3.1.1 The Doctor of Philosophy degree ........................................ 22
      2.3.1.2 The process of knowledge creation in doctoral research ........ 24
      2.3.1.3 Contextual challenges of doctoral research ...................... 28
      2.3.2 Self-motivation beliefs ................................................... 32
      2.3.2.1 Self-efficacy ................................................................. 33
      2.3.2.2 Task interest and valuing .................................................. 33
      2.3.2.3 Other self-motivational and metacognitive beliefs .............. 34
   2.4 Performance phase ............................................................. 36
      2.4.1 Self-control ................................................................. 36
      2.4.1.1 Self-control, self-discipline, and self-regulation .................. 40
      2.4.1.2 Self-control and procrastination ...................................... 41
      2.4.2 Self-observation ........................................................... 43
   2.5 Self-reflection phase ............................................................ 47
      2.5.1 Self-judgements ............................................................. 48
      2.5.1.1 Self-evaluation ............................................................. 48
      2.5.1.2 Causal attributions ..................................................... 49
4.3 Participants

4.3.1 Recruitment process

4.3.2 Participation rates

4.3.3 Background demographic factors

4.3.3.1 Gender

4.3.3.2 Age

4.3.4 Current candidature factors

4.3.4.1 Stage of candidature

4.3.4.2 Enrolment load

4.3.4.3 Broad field of study

4.3.4.4 University location

4.4 Instruments

4.4.1 Initial Survey

4.4.2 Journey Tracking Survey (JTS)

4.4.2.1 Section 1. “Well-being” - Mental Health

4.4.2.2 Section 2. “Goals Scale for the Present” – State Hope Scale

4.4.2.3 Section 3. “Doctoral Journey” – Doctoral Progress

4.4.2.4 JTS Process Feedback

4.4.3 Follow-up Survey

4.5 Procedure

4.5.1 Journey Tracking Survey process

4.5.2 Graph Feedback groups

4.5.3 Journey Tracking Survey process feedback invitation

4.6 Website management

4.7 Data analysis

4.7.1 Quantitative analyses

4.7.2 Qualitative analyses

4.7.2.1 Research Question 4 (Chapter 6)

4.7.2.2 Research Question 7 (Chapter 8)

4.8 Chapter Summary

5. A GLOBAL PROFILE: FINDINGS AND LIMITATIONS

5.1 Introduction

5.2 Doctoral Progress – Month 1

5.2.1 Distribution of scores
5.2.2 Background demographic factors
  5.2.2.1 Gender 128
  5.2.2.2 Age 129

5.2.3 Current Candidature Factors
  5.2.3.1 Stage of candidature 129
  5.2.3.2 Enrolment load 130
  5.2.3.3 Broad field of study 130
  5.2.3.4 University location 131

5.2.4 Relationships among Month 1 JTS scores 131

5.2.5 Section Summary 133

5.3 Mental Health – Month 1
  5.3.1 Distribution of scores 134
  5.3.2 Background demographic factors
    5.3.2.1 Gender 135
    5.3.2.2 Age 136

5.3.3 Current candidature factors
  5.3.3.1 Stage of candidature 137
  5.3.3.2 Enrolment load 138
  5.3.3.3 Broad field of study 138
  5.3.3.4 University location 138

5.3.4 Section summary 139

5.4 State Hope – Month 1
  5.4.1 Distribution of scores 139
  5.4.2 Background demographic factors
    5.4.2.1 Gender 140
    5.4.2.2 Age 141

5.4.3 Current candidature factors
  5.4.3.1 Stage of candidature 142

5.4.4 Interactions between stage of candidature and age
  5.4.4.1 Enrolment load 144
  5.4.4.2 Broad field of study 145
  5.4.4.3 University location 145

5.4.5 Section summary 146

5.5 Chapter summary 146
6. **EXPLORING WITHIN: DRILLING INTO STUDENT DIFFERENCES IN DOCTORAL SELF-REGULATION** 148

6.1 Introduction ................................................................. 148

6.2 High scores - Forethought phase ........................................ 150

6.3 High scores - Performance phase ....................................... 156

6.4 High scores - Self-reflection phase ..................................... 160

6.5 Low scores – Forethought phase ....................................... 167

6.6 Low scores – Performance phase ....................................... 174

6.7 Low scores – Self-reflection phase ..................................... 176

6.8 Chapter summary .............................................................. 187

7. **STABILITY AND CHANGE – A LONGITUDINAL EXPLORATION OF DOCTORAL PROGRESS RATINGS** 190

7.1 Introduction ................................................................. 190

7.2 Investigating Doctoral Progress scores over time ...................... 192

7.3 Background demographic factors ....................................... 194

7.3.1 Gender ............................................................................. 194

7.3.2 Age ................................................................................ 195

7.4 Current candidature factors ................................................. 196

7.4.1 Enrolment load ............................................................... 196

7.4.2 Broad field of study ......................................................... 197

7.4.3 University location ......................................................... 197

7.4.4 Section summary ......................................................... 198

7.5 Doctoral Progress Feedback Graph ...................................... 199

7.6 The relationships between Month 1 and averaged Doctoral Progress scores ........................................ 203

7.7 Relationships between Doctoral Progress scores and Month 12 Candidature Status .................................................. 209

7.8 Chapter summary .............................................................. 214
8. RECIPROCAL BENEFITS? EXPLORING RESPONSES TO JTS PARTICIPATION

8.1 Introduction 217
8.2 Participants 218
8.3 Logistics of the JTS process 221
  8.3.1 Survey response burden 221
  8.3.2 The feedback graph 221
  8.3.3 Anonymity 222
  8.3.4 Retrospective graph adjustment 222
  8.3.5 Missing graph data 223
  8.3.6 Clarity of survey input form 223
  8.3.7 Self-regulatory factors 223
  8.3.8 Section summary 224
8.4 Relevance of the JTS process 225
  8.4.1 Relevance of the JTS content 225
  8.4.2 Relevance of the JTS process experience 230
  8.4.3 Section summary 233
8.5 Application of the JTS process 234
  8.5.1 Non-specific responses 234
  8.5.2 ‘Reflecting’ 237
  8.5.3 ‘Regulating’ 243
  8.5.4 Section summary 249
8.6 Using the JTS for self-regulation 250
  8.6.1 Section summary 255
8.7 Further investigation of the university location effect 256
8.8 Chapter summary 257

9. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS 259
9.1 Introduction 259
9.2 Summary of findings 259
9.3 Interpretation and implications of findings 262
9.4 Limitations 269
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>Future directions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>Conclusions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>APPENDICES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>Appendix 1: List of appendices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>Appendix 2: Email invitation to DDOGS (Australia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>Appendix 3: Email invitation to DDOGS (International)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>Appendix 4: Email attachment – Invitation to PhD students (Australia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>Appendix 5: Email attachment – Invitation to PhD students (International)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>Appendix 6: Participant Information Statement – Survey component</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>Appendix 7: Consent Form (Online) – Survey component</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>Appendix 8: Participant Information Statement – JTS component</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>Appendix 9: Consent Form – JTS component</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.10</td>
<td>Appendix 10: Initial Survey – Contents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.11</td>
<td>Appendix 11: Correlations among Doctoral Journey items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.12</td>
<td>Appendix 12: Internal reliabilities for JTS measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.13</td>
<td>Appendix 13: JTS Month 1 Comment groups by demographic and candidature factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.14</td>
<td>Appendix 14: JTS Process Feedback participation by demographic and candidature factors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

x
List of Tables

Table 1 JTS Process Participation .......................................................... 103
Table 2 Distribution of Participants by Age Group .............................. 105
Table 3 Distribution of Participants by Stage of Candidature ............. 106
Table 4 The 5 Item Mental Health Inventory (MHI-5; Berwick et al., 1991) .......................................................... 111
Table 5 Number of Commenting Participants by Doctoral Progress Score Group .................. 121
Table 6 Median Month 1 Doctoral Progress Scores by Gender ............ 128
Table 7 Median Month 1 Doctoral Progress Scores by Age Group ........ 129
Table 8 Median Month 1 Doctoral Progress Scores by Stage of Candidature .................. 130
Table 9 Median Month 1 Doctoral Progress Scores by Enrolment Load .... 130
Table 10 Median Month 1 Doctoral Progress Scores by Broad Field of Study .................. 130
Table 11 Median Month 1 Doctoral Progress Scores by University Location .................. 131
Table 12 Correlations Among Month 1 Doctoral Progress, MHI-5, and State Hope Scale Scores .......................................................... 133
Table 13 Median Month 1 MHI-5 Scores by Gender ......................... 136
Table 14 Median Month 1 MHI-5 Scores by Age Group ........................ 136
Table 15 Median Month 1 MHI-5 Scores by Stage of Candidature ........ 137
Table 16 Median Month 1 MHI-5 Scores by Enrolment Load ............... 138
Table 17 Median Month 1 MHI-5 Scores by Broad Field of Study ......... 138
Table 18 Median Month 1 MHI-5 Scores by University Location .......... 139
Table 19 Median Month 1 State Hope Scale Scores by Gender .............. 141
Table 41 Correlations Among Month 1 Doctoral Journey Items ........................................... 319

Table 42 Internal Reliabilities for JTS Measures .................................................................. 320

Table 43 Distribution of Participants in Month 1 Comment Groups by Demographic and Candidature Factors and by Doctoral Progress Score Group ........................................... 321

Table 44 Distribution of Participants in JTS Process Feedback Analysis by Demographic and Candidature Factors ........................................................................................................ 322
List of Figures

Figure 1. Phases and subprocesses of self-regulation.......................................................... 13

Figure 2. Schematic of the hope theory model................................................................... 86

Figure 3. Sample size and data source for each analysis set by chapter......................... 104

Figure 4. Screenshot of Section 3 of the JTS. ................................................................. 115

Figure 5. Screenshot of a completed feedback graph in Month 12. .................................. 117

Figure 6. Frequency histogram of Month 1 Doctoral Progress scores.............................. 127

Figure 7. Group median scores for Month 1 MHI-5 and State Hope Scale scores by Doctoral Progress scores................................................................. 132

Figure 8. Frequency histogram of Month 1 MHI-5 scores............................................... 135

Figure 9. Median Month 1 MHI-5 scores by age group................................................... 137

Figure 10. Frequency histogram of Month 1 State Hope Scale scores.............................. 140

Figure 11. Median Month 1 State Hope Scale scores by age group.................................. 142

Figure 12. Median Month 1 State Hope Scale scores by stage of candidature.................. 143

Figure 13. Median Month 1 State Hope scores as a function of age group and stage of candidature................................................................. 144

Figure 14. Total number of JTS completions by Feedback Graph group.......................... 201

Figure 15. Number of participants who completed each month of the JTS by Feedback Graph group................................................................. 202

Figure 16. Median averaged Doctoral Progress scores for Month 1 Doctoral Progress score groups..................................................................................... 204

Figure 17. Averaged Doctoral Progress scores by Month 1 Doctoral Progress score group... 206
Figure 18. Proportions of negative and positive averaged Doctoral Progress scores by Month 1 Doctoral Progress scores........................................................................................................ 208

Figure 19. Month 1 Doctoral Progress scores by Month 12 Candidature Status.................. 212

Figure 20. Averaged Doctoral Progress scores by Month 12 Candidature Status............. 213

Figure 21. Month 1 Doctoral Progress scores with averaged Doctoral Progress score valence for participants who provided ‘no JTS Process Feedback’................................................................. 252

Figure 22. Month 1 Doctoral Progress scores with averaged Doctoral Progress score valence for participants who provided ‘non-specific’ comments................................................................. 253

Figure 23. Month 1 Doctoral Progress scores with averaged Doctoral Progress score valence for participants who provided ‘reflecting’ comments................................................................. 254

Figure 24. Month 1 Doctoral Progress scores with averaged Doctoral Progress score valence for participants who provided ‘regulating’ comments................................................................. 255
Abstract

In educational psychology, self-regulation is a construct that has been used to explain students’ self-initiated efforts to implement cognitive, emotional, and behavioural strategies to guide direction and sustain motivation during the pursuit of personal educational goals. While the academic and performance outcomes of various aspects of self-regulation have been studied in a range of formal and informal learning domains, there has been a lack of published research regarding self-regulation in the doctoral research context. As the doctoral research context is typically more longitudinal, complex, and individualised than other learning domains, it would be expected to be particularly demanding in terms of self-regulation. How might students at this elite level of education differ in their self-regulatory efforts? Moreover, as a multitude of other factors influence the experience of PhD candidature, is it possible to discern any relationship between self-regulatory efficacy and doctoral research progress?

Using an exploratory mixed-methods design, this study followed over 800 PhD students at various stages of candidature across a year of their doctoral research. Despite the many inherent challenges to the study of self-regulation as a cyclical feedback process in this context, the results of this study showed that differences in PhD students’ self-regulatory efficacy can be identified, and that these can be considered to be an important factor in the management of doctoral research. In particular, implementing effective self-regulatory practices led to greater satisfaction with progress, which was itself motivating, and was associated with continued enrolment and thesis completion. In contrast, ineffective self-regulatory behaviours, if left unchecked, were associated with an increased risk of withdrawal or taking leave from candidature.

Considering the relationship found between students’ feelings about progress and the reported use of self-regulatory behaviours, the persistent dissatisfaction with progress that was experienced by a significant minority of students suggests the value of targeted interventions to assist these students to develop greater self-regulatory efficacy. The Journey Tracking Survey process, developed as a means of student self-monitoring in this study, was utilised successfully by some students in a more systematic manner to improve their self-regulatory functioning and hence their progress. This demonstrated the utility of this simple tool for PhD student use, in addition to further research purposes. However, consistent with prior research, the results of this study also highlighted the importance of the supervisor to students’ self-regulatory efforts, through the provision of regular, frequent, and constructive feedback.
The outcomes of this investigation contribute to the limited literature on self-regulation in doctoral learners in a number of ways. Zimmerman’s (2000) cycle of self-regulation was shown to be relevant to understanding differences in students’ performance at the highest levels of formal education, and a new method for exploring self-regulation in this complex, individualised, and longitudinal context was discussed. The results also offer guidance for the design and evaluation of interventions for students who need assistance in enhancing their self-regulation, by generating a self-monitoring method for this purpose. Encouraging this type of student development, in conjunction with quality supervision and doctoral pedagogy, may contribute to improved rates of timely and successful PhD completions. In the process, PhD students may be better equipped with self-regulatory attributes that are likely to be of use within and beyond academe. The implications of these results thus extend beyond students and supervisors to all stakeholders in doctoral education.