

A Tool to Assist Postgraduate Research Students and their Supervisors in Selecting a Dissertation Topic

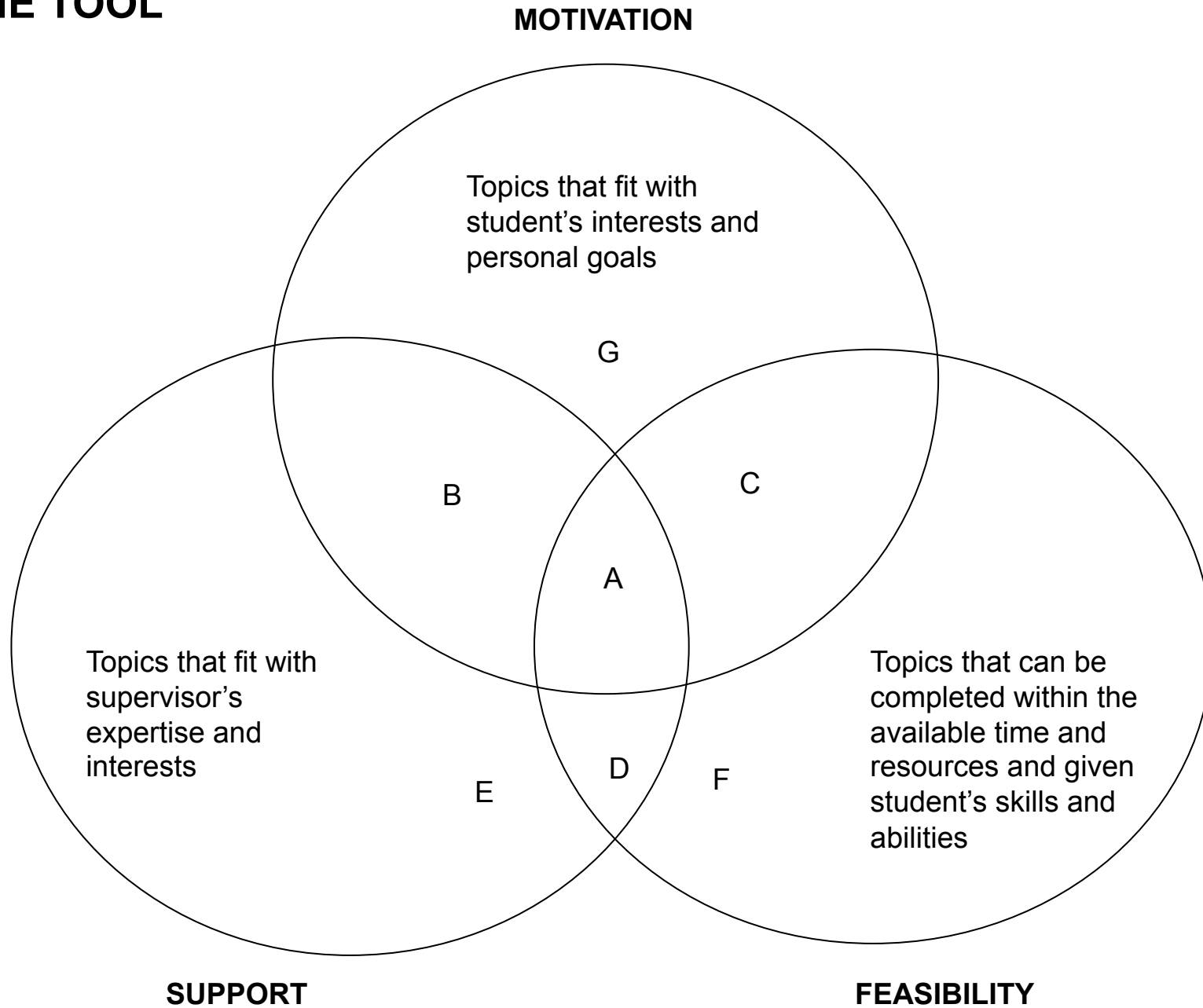
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- Studies examining the factors that influence postgraduate research completion rates fall into two broad groups. The first have examined the effect of quantifiable variables such as age, gender, mode of study (i.e. part-time or full-time), and class of first degree on completion rates (e.g. Wright and Cochrane 2000). The second have focused on the effects of differences in the supervisor-student relationship (e.g. Styles and Radloff 2001).
- Neither group of studies has given much attention to the effect of choices concerning the dissertation topic. Intuitively, however, it seems likely that the choice of dissertation topic has a significant effect on the likelihood that a student will complete his or her dissertation for three reasons.

- First, in so far as students are by nature more interested in and are more likely to realise personal goals (such as gaining employment) by pursuing some topics rather than others, their choice of topic is likely to affect their *motivation* to carry out the work required to complete a dissertation.
- Second, in so far as supervisors are more interested in and more qualified to supervise some topics than others, it may affect the adequacy of the *support* that a student receives from academic staff during his/her candidature. This lack of support could take several forms—inadequate assistance in refining the research topic, limited or poor quality feedback on written work, poor decisions in selecting examiners.

- Third, to the extent that some topics are more easily researchable than others within the limited timeframe and financial resources that are typically available to postgraduate research students and given students' respective skills and abilities, it may affect the *feasibility* of their research.
- The purpose of this supervisory tool is to assist students and their supervisors in selecting a dissertation topic by providing them with a way of assessing alternative topics in terms of their effects *vis-à-vis* motivation, support and feasibility. As such, it points to the potential risks for both student and supervisor in the selection of particular topics.

THE TOOL



- It is envisaged that students and supervisors will discuss the issues arising from use of this tool with one another and use it as the basis for joint decision about which topic to pursue.
- Ideally, students will pursue dissertation topics that fall within the space marked 'A.' Such topics pose the least risk in terms of non-completion.
- Students who pursue dissertation topics that fall within the space marked 'B' run the risk of not completing their dissertations because of a lack of the required resources, time, and skills. At the very least, they run the risk of not completing their dissertations on time—i.e. within the four-year timeframe currently required in Australian universities.

- Students who pursue topics that fall within the area marked 'C' run the risk of not completing their dissertations because of a lack of support from their supervisors.
- Students who pursue topics that fall within the area marked 'D' run the risk of not completing their dissertations because they lose the motivation required to carry out the research.
- Students who pursue topics that fall within the area marked 'E' run the risk of not completing their dissertations because they lose the motivation required to carry out the research, they lack the required resources, time, and skills or both.

- Students who pursue topics that fall within the area marked 'F' run the risk of not completing their dissertations either because they lose the motivation required to carry out the research, a lack of support from their supervisors, or both.
- Students who pursue topics that fall within the area marked 'G' run the risk of not completing their dissertations either because they lack support from their supervisors, they lack the required resources, time, and skills, or both.

References

- Styles I. and A. Radloff (2001) 'The Synergistic Thesis: Student and Supervisor Perspectives,' *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 25 (1), pp.97-106.
- Wright T. and Cochrane R. (2000) 'Factors Influencing Successful Submission of PhD Theses,' *Studies in Higher Education*, 25 (2), pp. 181-195.