



When Your HDR Research Stalls

A project management approach

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Acknowledgment of Country

UTS acknowledges the Gadigal people, the Boorooberongal people of the Dharug Nation, the Bidjigal people and the Gamaygal people, upon whose ancestral lands our university stands. We would also like to pay respect to the Elders both past and present, acknowledging them as the Traditional Custodians for these lands.

Why this session

Many candidatures stall at some point.

Project management treats a stall as a risk that can be reduced before it happens, and as an issue that can be managed once it has.

Part 1 About 15 minutes

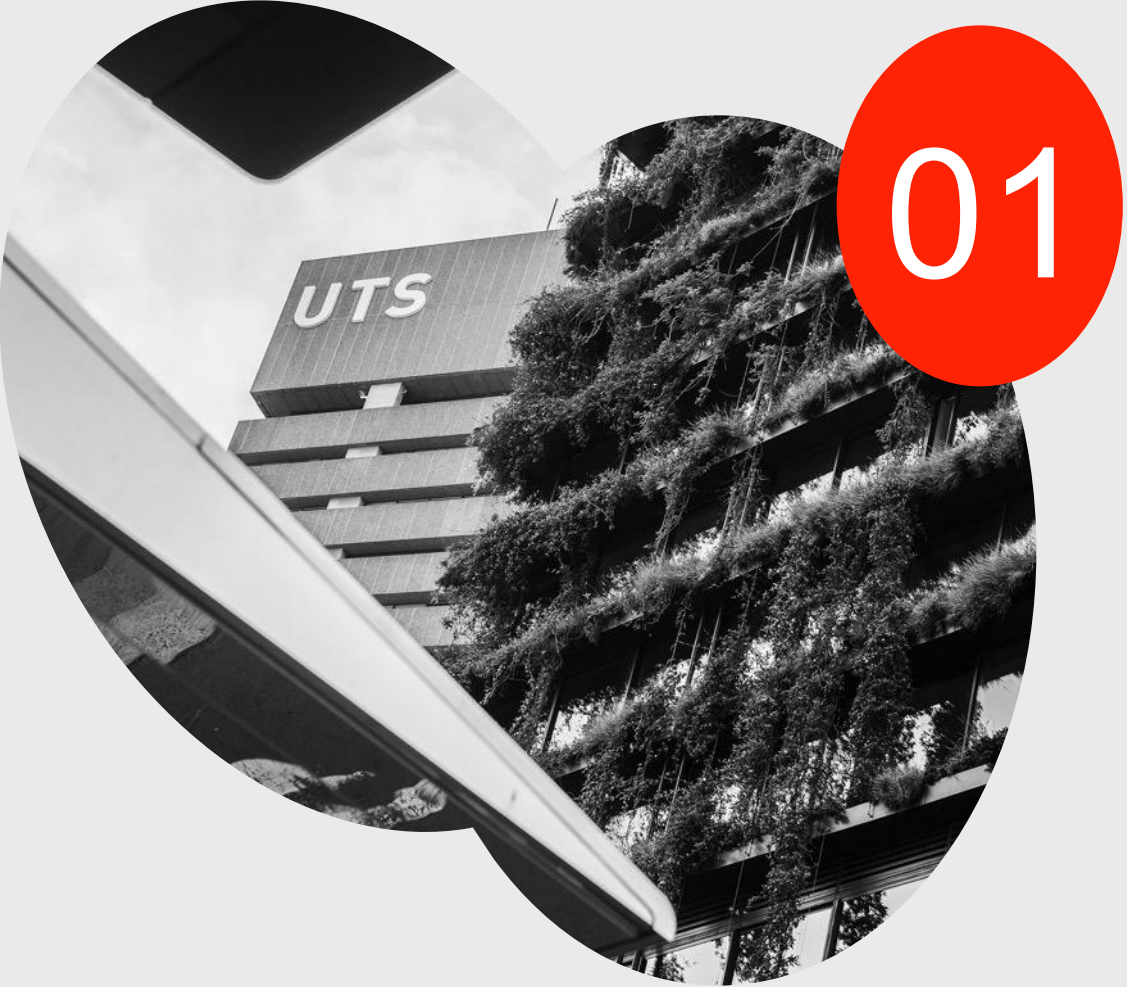
Understand: what a stall is, and what causes it

Part 2 About 25 minutes

Prevent: reducing the likelihood of a stall

Part 3 About 30 minutes

Recover: getting moving again once a stall happens



01

Part 1: Understand

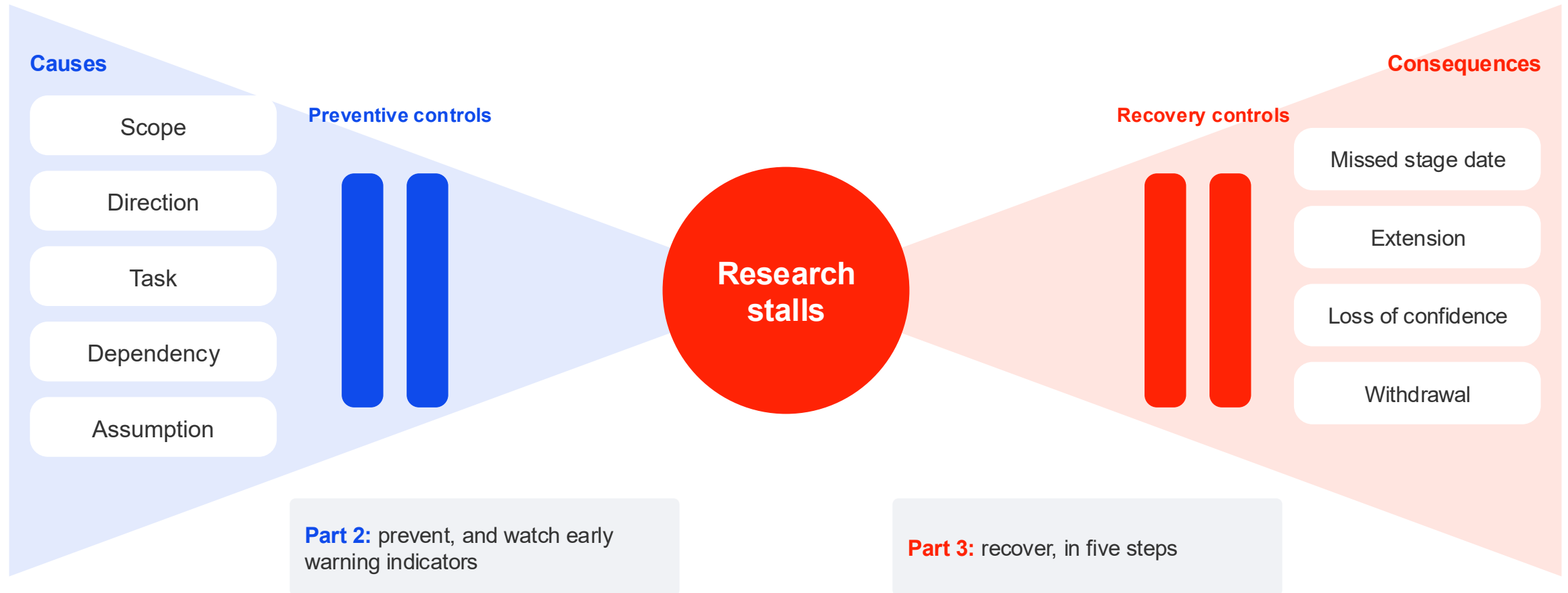
About 15 minutes

The bow-tie, five causes of stalls, and a case to diagnose

The bow-tie: a map of stalls

Before: a risk. Reduce the likelihood.

After: an issue. Reduce the impact.



Five causes of stalls

1

Scope

The work keeps growing. Every finding opens a new direction.

2

Direction

The standard is unclear, advice conflicts, or a decision is not made.

3

Task

Work is defined in units too large or vague to finish.

4

Dependency

Progress relies on someone else's input.

5

Assumption

The plan rests on something that turns out to be false.

Also a real cause: capacity. Health, caring responsibilities, paid work or financial pressure. These need support and, where needed, a formal change to your candidature, not a tighter plan.

Diagnose your case

12 min

3 min

Read and decide

Take a case number going round the table: 1 Lin, 2 Priya, 3 Tom, 4 Grace, 5 Omar, then repeat. On your own, decide the main cause.

About 45 sec each

Tell the group

The cause, and the one clue that gave it away.

Everyone

Agree or challenge

Is there a second cause? Is the clue the cause, or only a symptom?

Keep your case. You will come back to it in Part 3.

The five cases (fictional)

1 Scope

2 Direction

3 Task

4 Dependency

5 Assumption

Case 1: Lin

Second year, full-time

Planned: literature review drafted (12,000 words), interviews started. Finished: a 25,000-word review, no interviews. Each meeting ends with “have a look at...”. No exclusions are written down.

Case 2: Priya

Third year, two supervisors

Planned: methodology approved, experiments started. Finished: the chapter is on its third rewrite. One supervisor wants simulation, the other physical testing. They never meet with her together.

Case 3: Tom

First year, part-time, creative practice

Planned: a first body of work and a 3,000-word exegesis draft. Finished: many studio experiments, none selected, nothing written. Meetings are catch-ups with no agenda.

Case 4: Grace

Second year, industry-partnered

Planned: partner dataset received, analysis started. Finished: eleven weeks of waiting, filled with more reading. The partner is in legal review. No release date was ever agreed.

Case 5: Omar

Second year, part-time, laboratory science

Planned: dose-response results for chapter 3. Finished: four months of runs, no usable result. Two other labs report the same problem. Another cell line is available.



02

Part 2: Prevent

About 25 minutes

A pre-mortem, early warning indicators, and
one line of a risk register

The pre-mortem

12 min

Imagine:

**It is six months from now.
Your research has stalled.**

What happened?

A normal review asks what might go wrong. A pre-mortem assumes it already has, and asks why.

3 min Write

On your own, up to three causes, one per sticky note. Make them specific.

6 min Read and place

Go round the table. Each person reads one note aloud and places it under its cause on the wall. Repeat.

3 min Discuss

Which cause is most common? Which would be hardest to see coming?

Early warning indicators and preventive controls

Cause	Early warning indicator	Preventive control
Scope	New aims or chapters added since the last agreed plan	A scope statement with a written exclusion list
Direction	The same section revised more than twice; conflicting advice unresolved after one meeting	Agree what good enough looks like early; record decisions
Task	No reviewable output in the last three weeks	Short timeboxed cycles, each ending in a reviewable output
Dependency	An input past its agreed date, or no date ever agreed	A dependency log with chase dates; a second line of work
Assumption	A critical assumption still untested at the planned date	Test critical assumptions early (pilots); plan a fallback

Three controls help with most causes: short timeboxed cycles, a dependency log, and a ten-minute retrospective each cycle.

Write one line of your risk register

8 min

Cause and stall

Example
My partner may delay data access, which would stall my analysis.

Early warning indicator

Example
Data not received by the agreed date.

Preventive control

Example
Agree the release date in writing. Keep the methods chapter as a second line of work.

Recovery response

Example
Resequence, escalate through my supervisor, and use a public dataset if needed.

4 min: write yours on a sticky note, from your top pre-mortem cause.

4 min: round the table. Read your indicator aloud. Is it observable, with a date?



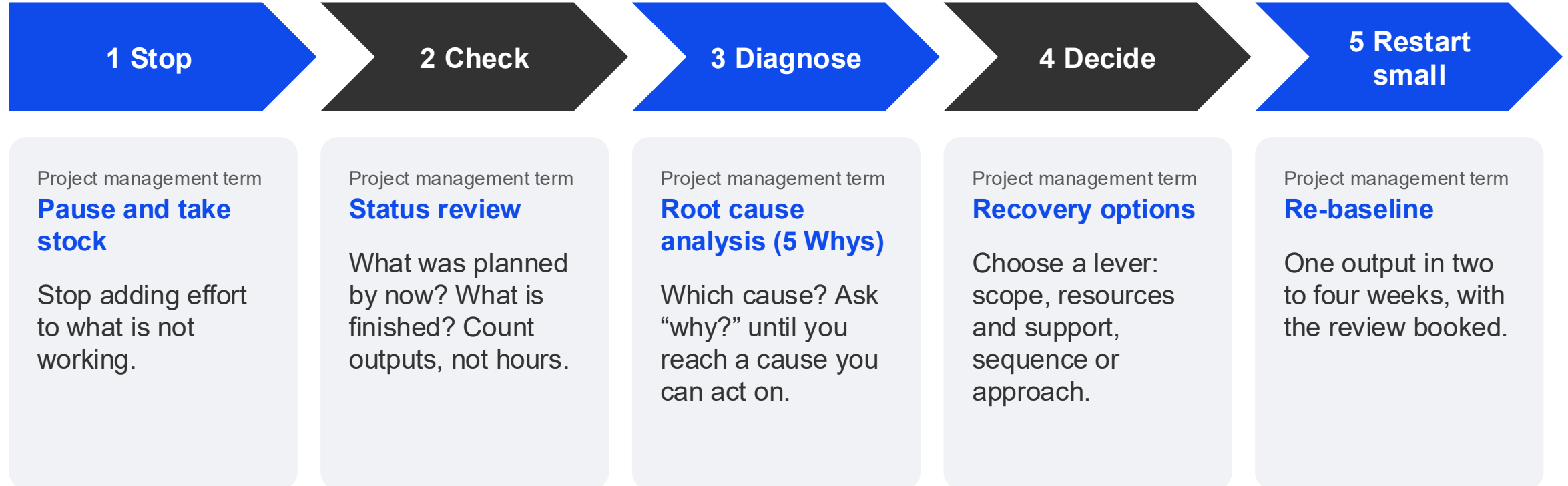
03

Part 3: Recover

About 30 minutes

A five-step recovery process, then your case again

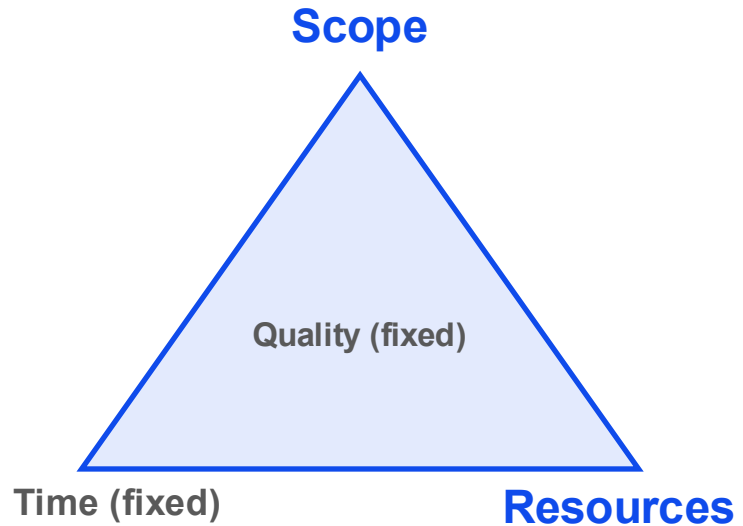
Five steps to recover from a stall



A stall is over when something is finished, not when a new plan is written.

Step 4: choosing a recovery lever

From the triple constraint



From re-planning the schedule

Sequence

Approach

Match the lever to the cause

Scope

Scope: cut or redefine what the thesis delivers

Direction

Resources and support: escalate so a decision is made

Task

Sequence: break the work down to the next small output

Dependency

Sequence: resequence, chase, or find another route

Assumption

Approach: a formal re-plan (change control)

Recover your case

20 min

6 min

Work the case

On your own, same case as Part 1. Work through the five steps and decide your plan.

About 45 sec each

Present your restart

Your lever, and the one output you would restart with.

Everyone

Be the supervisor

Ask one question, or suggest a different lever.

Then 2 minutes on your own: privately note one step that would help your own project. Not shared.

Your case and the five steps

On screen while you work

1 Stop

What is not working?

2 Check

Planned versus finished

3 Diagnose

Ask why, then why again

4 Decide

Choose the lever

5 Restart

One output, review date

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Prevent and recover

Before a stall: prevent

- Name likely causes (pre-mortem)
- Watch early warning indicators
- Put preventive controls in place

Stall

After a stall: recover

- 1 Stop
- 2 Check what is finished
- 3 Diagnose the cause
- 4 Decide on a lever
- 5 Restart small

Capacity stalls need support, not a tighter plan.

One thing to try in the next two weeks

Write it on a sticky note and take it with you.

Idea 1

**Share your risk
register line with
your supervisor**

Idea 2

**Start a
dependency log**

Idea 3

**Hold a ten-minute
retrospective on
the last month**

Idea 4

**Run the five steps
on a stall with
your supervisor**

Where to go next

If you are stalled now: raise it with your supervisors early. A stall raised early is easier to fix than one raised at a stage assessment.

If capacity is the cause

Talk to your HDR Coordinator or the Graduate Research School about formal options for your candidature.

UTS HDR Researcher Development

[Open the SharePoint site](#)

Support

Your supervisors; HDR Coordinators and Directors; Graduate Research School; UTS Counselling and Wellbeing

Your feedback

In person

Two minutes, anonymous.

Please complete the paper form and leave it with me at the door.

Paper form

Your answers shape the next workshops.



Thank you