

Whakapapa of research: Frameworks for both subject fields and individual development

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Abstract: A frequent question raised by new doctorate holders is “*how do I go forward from here to build a research career?*” In addressing the question, this brief essay attempts to establish a context that includes three inter-related research frameworks. The first level is the broad structure provided by the subject field and its sub-areas. The second level, which nests within the first, represents the key researchers who contributed fundamental work to a given subject area. It is suggested that from these leaders, there is often a whakapapa of people who developed from each of them. The final level is the individual who is in the early stages of a research career and who may represent an end-point of the previous whakapapa. Given this context of a layered whakapapa, it is suggested that one way for an individual to ‘go forward’ is to begin by creating a model of what one’s own research whakapapa might look like over a number of years, and then using it as a guide for research activity.

Keywords: Career development, planning, research frameworks, whakapapa of research

Introduction

In seeking an answer to the question frequently raised by new doctorate holders “how do I go forward from here in making a research career?” it is helpful to become clear about what “here” is and where the “forward” path is heading. If one is in a tertiary institution, the research activity usually needs to be accompanied by relative emphasis on teaching, community involvement and administrative contribution. So the path of advancement generally encompasses all four components—albeit with a very clear emphasis on research performance. While recognising that a research career is often accompanied by these other dimensions, this paper is restricted to considering only the research planning component of one’s career.

The research field

Most fields of research are formed by pooling the work of researchers, with key works becoming recognised as being ‘classical’ or as being ‘seminal’ to the field. In constructing a whakapapa for a given field, it is necessary to create a basic framework of defined areas. For example in the research field of Human Movement Science, major areas include: bio-mechanics, exercise physiology, psychology of movement learning, sociology of sport and leisure, history of sport, and pedagogy.

Each of these areas may be partitioned further into more sharply-defined sub-areas, with the branches of the framework linking the sub-areas to the key areas which in turn converge to the single “ancestral” source. Although these organisational processes are complex, it is worth noting that in their book on the nature of academic disciplines, Becher and Trowler (2001) use concepts such as “tribes” “territories” and “cultures” to help understand them. So the idea of using a whakapapa model appears appropriate.

The upper part of Figure 1 (coloured purple) represents the development of the subject field level in the horizontal direction. The fact that we have seen the formation of a great number of cross-disciplinary areas, like bio-mechanics or psycho-physiology, illustrates the utility of such a whakapapa that focuses on the research field level because it allows for convergence of areas and the branching of new areas and fields.

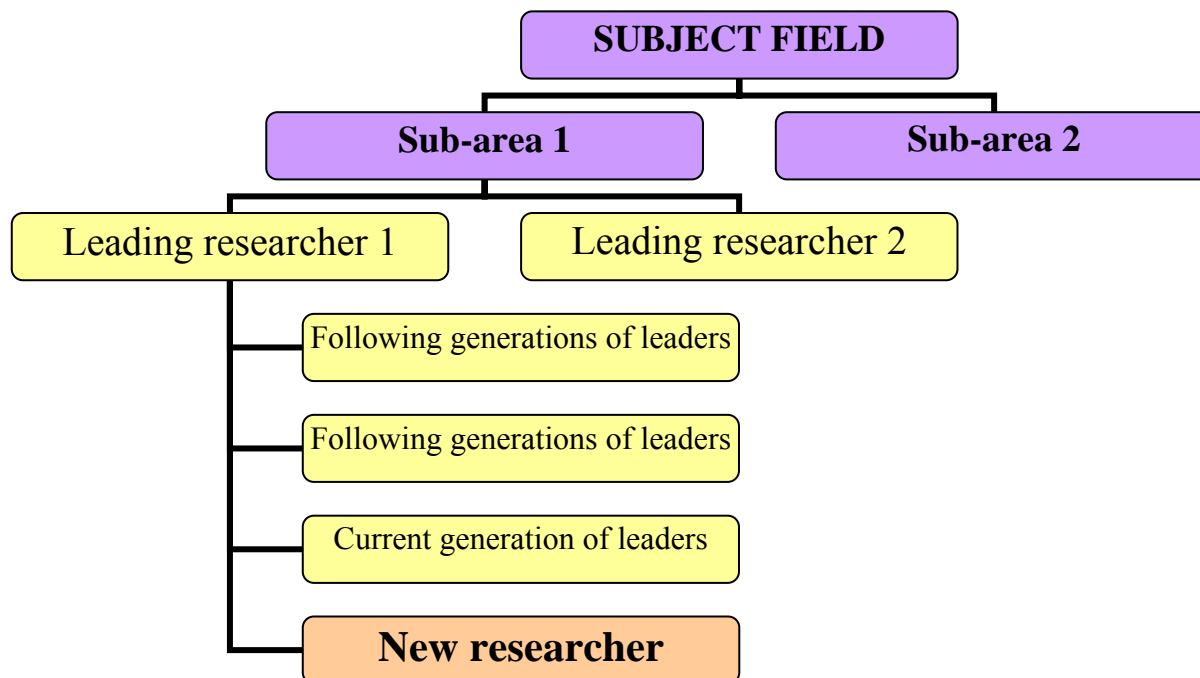


Figure 1. Whakapapa: Level 1 is the subject field which shows two of several sub-areas. Level 2 nests within a sub-area and consists of leading researchers and subsequent generations of leaders. Level 3 is the new researcher.

The individual careers

At the second level of Figure 1 (highlighted in yellow) we have the leading researchers who produce the advances in knowledge in each of the areas and sub-areas of the research field. Each name usually leads to other names; but instead of generations of biologically-related people like we have in tribal whakapapa, here the generations are of successive groups of students who were heavily influenced by their supervisor-mentor-colleagues. Many of those students become leaders in their own right and in turn help produce another generation. So the names of the old leaders flow on to the new leaders to form a vertical component of the framework at this level (Figure 1).

There is yet another level—which is delving deeper into each individual's own philosophy, approach and framework for their own research work and career. The discoveries and contributions researchers make, do not exist in isolation; they usually exist as part of the individual's plans and activities as a researcher/scholar. Except for serendipitous events, it is probably the formation of this individual and personal plan for a research career that leads to the career and that earns the place in the broader whakapapa levels. So from the bottom of Figure 1 where the emerging researcher is poised, the third level of whakapapa develops (Figure 2).

Herein lies part of the answer to the question posed at the start of this paper. That is, that the individual should construct their own framework for research that encompasses past, present

and future research areas, questions, topics and projects at a broad level. This plan should go forward in time as a general template or model for future research activity. It should be driven by the areas, topics, questions, excitements and relationships of interest. While it provides directions and a guide to present and future work, it also needs to be adaptable to change.

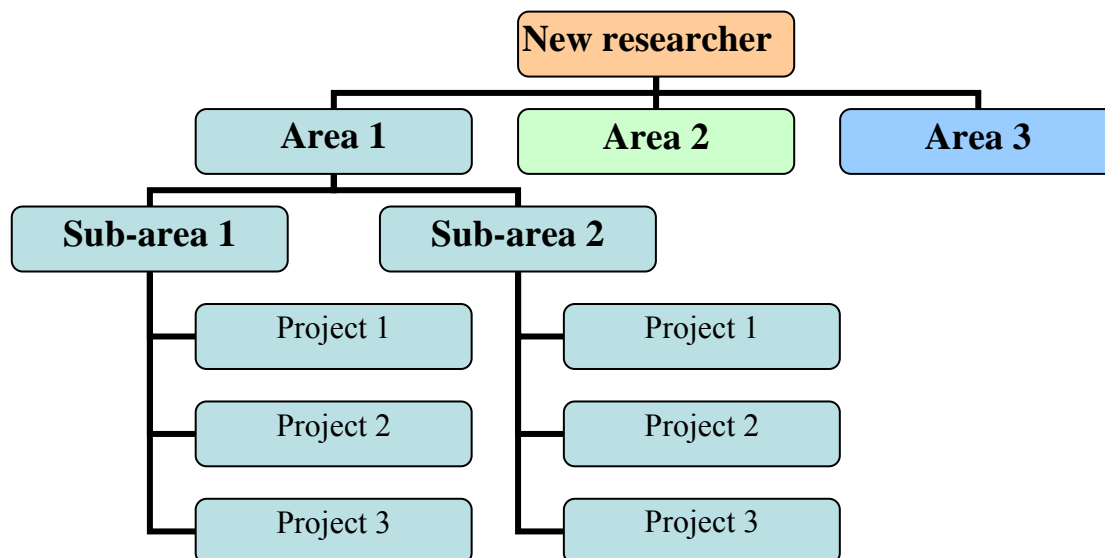


Figure 2. Whakapapa Level 3: A sample framework for a researcher's plan which models the potential research activity.

No other person but the individual can fulfil the responsibility of constructing this personal research whakapapa that is a proposed agenda for the future. It is most helpful however, to consult widely to test one's own views and motivations. A corollary of taking up this challenge is that the individual will come to understand more fully, the logic, rationale and validity of their own research interests and imperatives. One then comes to have a very good idea of 'where' to go, 'why' and with a reasonable idea of 'how'.

In conclusion, this paper has outlined three whakapapa-type levels for research. One is the broad subject field level that helps define their specific approaches. The second level is that of the individuals who have come before. They are usually nested under one main subject field but like a tribe, can have several generations emanating from earlier leaders. The third level is that 'nested' within the individual. In the case of one who is at the early career stage, the plan is a general model of what the whakapapa might look like as it unfolds and becomes history. It is a model of the future intentions developed through self-reflective and self-determinative processes and as such should provide some clarity of direction. However, it is almost certain that the working model will not predict some future developments—especially where new interests form from a confluence of ideas and energies. So there should be adaptability. Needless to say, once a worker has a plan for research direction, the implementation stage requires a complex mix of strategic, practical and other research skills.

References

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