GETTING STARTED ON YOUR PhD.

Introduction
Undergraduate study does not necessarily prepare students for postgraduate study especially in programs that are predominantly researched based. At postgraduate level an even greater emphasis is placed on self-directed learning and the acquisition of academic skills. The thesis is not the end of your study but your first piece of academic work. Completing it is both a contribution to new knowledge and a learning process for you.

College has set up the Centre for Academic Practice and Student Learning (CAPSL). It is a very new body and has a high priority in the College Strategic Plan. You can find CAPSL on the TCD website. One of the areas that will be developed by CAPSL is graduate learning and teaching support under the Dean of Graduate Studies. Teaching and learning are not the same things. The skills a teacher uses to guide a student’s learning are not necessarily the same skills that students use to learn. CAPSL hopes to set up systems that promote both teaching and learning. The Graduate Student’s Union is represented on CAPSL so if you want your concerns or ideas expressed, speak to your delegate.

Where can I find out what to do?
There are already a number of graduate supports working in College. These are generally Department based so ask about them. Some Departments run structured dissertation preparation programs. Others have research seminars, guest lecturers and discussion groups. Some have printed guidelines about expectations, word limits, dates and deadlines. Still others have assessment and structured supervision guidelines or at least undergraduate equivalents that can be applied. The more general pattern however is one of self-directed learning where the initiative for defining and arranging learning support, rests with the student. This model possibly more closely represents the likely work environment of graduate students than a more structured model. Nevertheless, there is no need to make the learning process harder and less efficient than it needs to be.

Some things that have been found to help graduate students
Some parts of the research process are extremely difficult. Getting started is one of them. A structured (taught) program on how to write a dissertation specific to your discipline can be helpful. So can reading a book about the process e.g.,


Some useful websites on the research and the PhD process are:

- www-smi.stanford.edu/people/pratt/smi/advice.html
- www.otago.ac.nz/assistance/postgrad.asp.
- www.sce.carleton.ca/faculty/chinneck/thesis.html
- http://is2.dal.ca/%7Edts/resources.html
- www.dissertationdoctor.com
- www.learnerassociates.net/dissthes/

Copies of dissertations are deposited in the library so there are examples of what you have to produce there. Try searching the web for guidelines from other universities. This is an example of taking control of your own learning.

**Course handbooks**

Well prepared course handbooks that address some of the transition, orientation and control issues above are very useful. If your course does not have one perhaps a group of graduate students could offer to draft something for your course based on your recent experience. As a minimum this will clarify issues for you and be of immense help to students in later years. They can do the up-dates as part of their structured learning plan to keep the document relevant. Departmental staff are usually so focused on their own work that they jump at the opportunity to have graduate students do some of this work.

**Summary**

Your task is to create order out of the chaos created by asking an original research question. The nature of your research is therefore a confrontation with chaos. To confront chaos and create new order, you are going to have to develop new learning skills. As in all walks of life, the key to managing chaos is planning. The Student Counselling Service runs workshops on basic organisation skills and has information sheets on its webpage. The skills gained through conducting your research, are as important to your lifelong learning as the new knowledge you develop through your research.