GRADUATION: CHALLENGE ACCEPTED

You are essentially who you create yourself to be.
All that occurs in your life is the result of your own making.
Stephen Richards

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 GRADUATION: CHALLENGE ACCEPTED

The secret of getting ahead is getting started.
Mark Twain

Congratulations! The fact that you are reading this most likely means you are about to start on a graduation project. In that case you are only one final step away from completing your academic bachelor or master's curriculum, an MBA or a PhD.

And yes, that is indeed worth a compliment. Getting to this point is already a major accomplishment, something to be extremely proud of. Not everyone who starts such a curriculum or program makes it this far. Not everyone is able or willing to finish what they start.

And you will, not so very long from now.

1.1   Our alternative approach to graduation projects

Finalizing your curriculum or program will likely be one of the most rewarding things you will ever do. We[1] think graduation is wonderful, for starters because it gives you credits for all the time and energy you have spent and everything you have learned over recent months or years. And it will be something tangible to present to the outside world and

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1   Curious who 'we' are? Directly after chapter 8 we introduce ourselves briefly and say something about us, our backgrounds, experience and us as the authors of this book.

show what you are capable of. Graduation is a deliverable, a business card and a perfect crown on all your hard work.

If you are working on an MBA or MBA related curriculum, you have so far been in a class with fellow professionals following a prescribed schedule. You may have been studying part-time alongside your regular job, meaning that you have been juggling your studies, your work, your family and your friends while trying to fulfill your personal ambitions at the same time. And you have probably sometimes felt there were not enough hours in a day. Has it all been worth it so far? Either way, it's now time to finish up and start applying the knowledge you have gained.

If you are working on your Bachelor or Master of Science degree, your graduation project will be totally different from anything you have done so far. No more course work, no more obligatory attendance and no more exams. You are no longer tied to a schedule, prescribed reading or lazy group members who seem incapable of doing their share of the work. Instead, you will be able to do pretty much what you want, how and when you want to do it.

Sure, your institutions will have some conditions or guidelines regarding the subject, execution and planning of your project. These will vary at different institutions, and may differ per faculty or even per individual supervisor. Regardless of the format of graduation at your institution, one thing remains the same: it is about you crossing that highly desired finish line.

This book does not give a step-by-step guide to writing a graduation project. Partly because there is already a lot of literature in this field, and partly because we think there simply is no one-size-fits-all approach. Or if there is, we are not aware of it. Nor does it give you instructions on what methods or techniques you should use to get the 'best' results, whatever these may be.

What this book is about
This book will challenge your current perspective on your upcoming graduation. It will transform it into a very practical and useful perspective. In seven chapters we give our views, ideas and practical tips on what it means to be in charge of your own graduation project, how you can benefit from it and what 'being the leader' of the project actually entails.

We encourage you to adopt a realistic and very workable attitude to graduation by using a combination of practical tips and tricks, questions, exercises and examples from students and teachers who have already been through the process.

This book is for all aspiring graduates
Whether you are in your early twenties and trying to finish your engineering bachelor, in your forties rounding off an MBA, or retired and aspiring to a master's in psychology, each graduation project involves some similar elements. It is a means to an end, namely completing your degree. It may also be your entry ticket to another program or a specific job. But graduation is also something much more personal. A way to show your parents what you have been doing all those years besides partying with friends, or to show your boss that your education has not been a waste of the company's resources.

Graduation is about you
During your curriculum you may consider the educational system at your institution to be a bit too 'schoolish'. People telling you what to read, what to do, when to do it and whether or not you are doing it right. Especially when there are a large number of students in your program, you can sometimes feel like a sheep in the student flock, with the teachers herding you in the direction they want you to go. In such a system it is difficult to stand out. Until now, that is, because your graduation project is the perfect opportunity to do pretty much what

you want, how you want it and when you want to do it. The question is how to make yourself and your graduation project stand out from the crowd. How are you to make sure that your graduation project represents you and everything that you are capable of, instead of what all students in your program can do?

The only way to do this is to make your project entirely your own. And the only way to do that is to continuously take the initiative, stay active, and most importantly, stay in charge of your work. Nobody should get the chance to steer you in a direction you do not want to go.

Your graduation project will bring together things you enjoy, things you are good at and things that motivate you alongside your existing knowledge, experience and curiosity. The challenge lies in combining all these ingredients in a way that makes the final product totally yours, while still complying with the rules and regulations of your institution. Moreover, you are going to have to do this knowing that there is somebody (or several somebodies) who are going to tell you what is good and what is not. Not only will they have an opinion about your work, they will also be the people who decide whether and when you graduate and, when you do, the grade your work is awarded.

Boss versus leader
The key to accomplishing that perfect mix is to understand, remember and make sure that the 'boss' and decision maker of the project – your professor – does not also have to become the leader of your graduation. Because these are not necessarily one and the same. Bosses are the people who have the mandate to make decisions. That is often part of their job description. During your graduation project you cannot change the situation that there is a boss judging you and signing your degree certificate. But does this boss role make him the undisputed leader of your project?

This is where you come in, because there are many things you can change. You have the ability to influence the topic of your graduation, the composition of your committee (your team), the schedule and of course the content, direction and goal of the project. And does it not make much more sense for you to lead your own graduation project? In the end it is your project, and always will be.
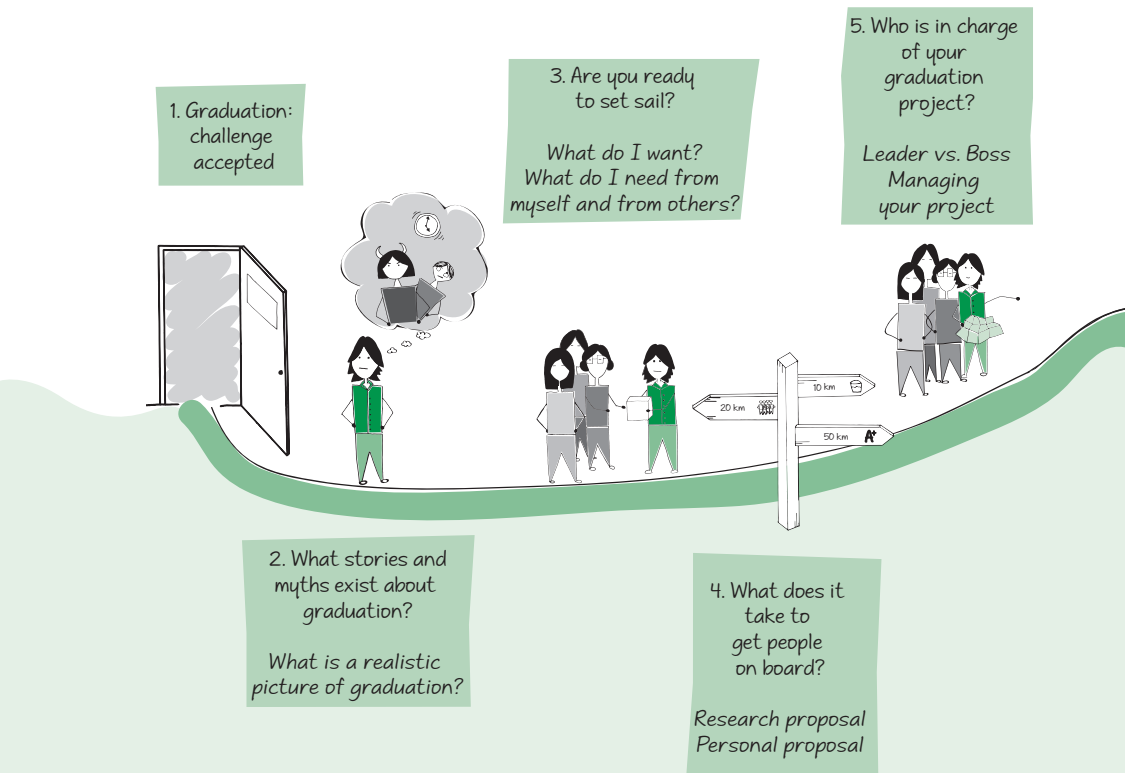
This may sound like news to you. But perhaps you have already taken the leadership role on several occasions, for instance when you had questions and asked them. At that moment you were leading the process. Or when you chose a professor, or when you set a meeting with her. Or when you applied for that amazing graduation internship at an external organization. Here too you were taking control of your own project. In all these circumstances you are taking the initiative, you are making your project happen. Right there and then.

We are almost sure you're thinking 'yes, but'. You are about to tell yourself that this is not how it works, that the committee decides everything and that they have control over when and where you graduate. And that surely this will only be after you have completed your project just the way they wanted you to. You simply have no say in the matter.

Well, too bad. Because we are pretty sure nobody has ever told you that's the way it has to be. It is merely a picture that you have created in your mind about graduation. And right now that is the one thing holding you back from taking the lead in your own project. And it should not be.

So, have we roused your curiosity about the idea of being in charge of your own graduation? Good! Read on, give it a go. We promise it's a lot easier than you may think. The question is not whether but when you will have the 'is that all?' moment we are sure will happen.

Figure 1.1

1. Graduation: challenge accepted

2. What stories and myths exist about graduation?

What is a realistic picture of graduation?

3. Are you ready to set sail?

What do I want? What do I need from myself and from others?

4. What does it take to get people on board?

Research proposal Personal proposal

5. Who is in charge of your graduation project?

Leader vs. Boss Managing your project

6. How to deal with unavoidable setbacks?

FINISH

7. How do you envision the final steps?

Completing, presenting and defending

8. Graduated: what's next?

1.2   Overview of the book

Whatever the graduation format at your institution, the people who
will be supervising you or the subject you choose or get assigned
to, graduation is serious business. And regardless of the endless
possibilities of what your graduation process and project can look like,
it will require your time, effort and dedication. Others will be there along
the way to support you, whether academically or socially. But in the end
there is only one person who is truly motivated to cross that finish line.
You.

You have only a limited influence on the binding conditions for your
project. But, as you may already have figured from the previous section,
we are convinced that you do have a choice when it comes to your
own role in the process. If you decide that you want to have both the
responsibility and the opportunity to determine the course of your
project, well then this is your book!

Figure 1.1 shows the elements we will discuss in order to help you
assume control of your project and become a good leader of your
graduation team.

Chapter 2
You have probably heard many stories about graduation projects.
And we guess many of these were not particularly positive. It is the bad
stories you hear and remember. And believe it or not, the stories that
people tell each other are in many cases pretty much the same. But are
they purely objective observations from the person who tells the story,
or might there be something else underlying all these horror stories?

Our first step is therefore to take the most common stories that people
tell each other about graduation projects, and in each case determine
what truth there is to them. We then describe some possible ways to set

up a graduation project that may show you it's not such a big deal as you perhaps have imagined.

Chapter 3
After disposing of all the myths about graduation in the previous chapter, we use this chapter to get you into graduation mode.
We encourage you to define your personal goals for your graduation, whatever they may be. Making these goals explicit is necessary in order to determine the ways and means of reaching these goals. What do you have to do to get started, and what does it take to stay productive? It's almost equally important to also define what you need from others. From your committee, but also from your fellow students, friends and family.

Chapter 4
Now you are in graduation mode, but that does not mean your team members are too. So what do your team members need from you? You will have to convince researchers that your project is worth their time, effort and expertise, for example. You will most likely do this in the form of a research proposal. We will discuss the elements of such a proposal together with insights into why they are valuable in the first place. We will also consider whether people outside of your institution might play a role in your project. What does it take from you to help them help you?

Chapter 5
By now you have set your graduation goals, decided who you want in your team (and who not) and you have convinced them to be a part of it. But this does not immediately mean you are the leader of this group. You still have to actually do the research, so the best part is yet to come. Becoming the leader of your project might not even be so difficult.
The real challenge lies in staying in that leading role during the course of the project so that you can complete it and achieve the goals you have set in your planning.

Chapter 6

When everything is going great it might seem easy to keep everyone motivated, including yourself. But what happens when you encounter situations where things are suddenly not running so smoothly?

Even when you are in charge, have clear goals and a good team, 'stuff' will happen. The so-called 'graduation dip' is apparently unavoidable. For some this immediately means crisis. But it does not necessarily have to be.

Chapter 7

After all the hard work you put in, you find yourself in the final stage of your project. It is time to round off, time to actually graduate. Many students believe that the graduation committee decides when you have reached this point, but we will explain why that is not how things work. Even in this final stage you can still take the initiative and remain in charge of your project. Sure, your committee will have the decision-making power, but that in no way makes your pre-discussed goals and planning suddenly worthless.

Chapter 8

Suddenly it strikes you: you have graduated! You are now a Bachelor or Master of Science, an Engineer, a Master of Arts, a Master of Business Administration or a Doctor. What's next? In this chapter we connect everything discussed earlier with things you can do after graduation. You can decide whether you want to use your graduation experience as an example of how you will handle any project in the future. Are you also going to be in charge here? Or are you going to let your future boss steer you in the direction of his or her goals, instead of your own?

It's up to you.