

***Traversing the Doctorate:
Reflections and Strategies from Students, Supervisors and
Administrators***

Confirmation of Candidature: An autoethnographic reflection from the dual identities of
student and research administrator

Abstract

The confirmation of candidature is a significant milestone in Higher Degree by Research programs. As research administrators, and as doctoral candidates ourselves, we have observed and experienced many different approaches to the confirmation of candidature process. In this chapter we describe the confirmation of candidature process at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) with a brief comparison to other institutions' processes. We use an autoethnographic approach to discuss the positive aspects of the confirmation of candidature process for research candidates with the aim of providing a rationale for the process and to answer the 'why do I have to do this?' question we are often asked in our research administrator roles. The chapter includes a set of useful and practical strategies that will assist research students to successfully complete the confirmation of candidature milestone. It is hoped that this information will be useful to research students, supervisors of research students, and the academic and administrative staff that are involved in the confirmation of candidature process.

Within the Australian higher education system confirmation of candidature is an important milestone in the Higher Degree by Research (HDR) program of study. Similar processes are also observed in universities in New Zealand, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States of America (USA). Successful confirmation signifies that the candidate has a viable project and has passed from the status of fledgling provisional student to fully confirmed candidate. After successfully completing confirmation, students are ready to begin collecting and analysing data and writing up findings that will form the basis of their final thesis. The confirmation of candidature is a significant step from which to initiate the next phases of the research and yet there is very little literature regarding this process and its importance within the Australian doctoral journey.

This chapter addresses this by providing an analysis of relevant issues from the reflective perspective of the authors who hold the dual roles of research student and research administrator. We provide a review of current literature and then discuss the specific confirmation of candidature process at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), followed by a brief comparison to other Australian institutions' processes and an overview of the equivalent practices internationally. We use an autoethnographic approach focusing on the positive aspects of the confirmation of candidature process with the aim of providing a rationale to research students for the process and to further increase research supervisors' and administrators' understanding of confirmation of candidature from the student perspective. The chapter includes useful and practical strategies to help research students successfully complete the confirmation of candidature milestone. It is hoped that the information provided is useful for students undergoing confirmation and that it can inform the practice and pedagogy of research administrators and research supervisors.

We are well positioned to take the role of autoethnographer as both HDR student experiencing the confirmation of candidature process and as research administrator within the

institutional setting. We undertook an iterative review of our personal data starting with our individual autobiographical recollections of confirmation of candidature drawing on our identities as both student and administrator. Data collected from the review of literature, Australian universities' confirmation of candidature processes, and the construction of this chapter itself then served as prompts for additional autobiographical recollections. Each author undertook a critical review of their personal reflections in order to understand and make sense of their experience of the confirmation of candidature. This was followed by a collaborative review of our shared experiences and meaning making which provoked additional autobiographical accounts of our experiences. We undertook this iterative approach a number of times until we were no longer generating new data. The final review focused on confirming our findings and co-construction of the outcomes for inclusion in the chapter. Although the chapter has been co-constructed, there are many single-voice reflections which are indicated accordingly.

At the time of writing, Cristy was the Senior Academic Program Support Officer, within the Faculty Research Office in the Faculty of Business, Education, Law, and Arts at the USQ. She was also undertaking a Doctor of Philosophy in Education at the same university. Douglas was the Acting Student Manager in the Office of Research Graduate Studies at the USQ. He was undertaking a Doctor of Philosophy in History at the University of Queensland. Both authors have worked in Research Administration for at least six years providing a unique perspective from which to reflect on their own experiences as both HDR students and administrators. The authors' reflections on the confirmation of candidature process were undertaken according to these experiences as doctoral students and as administrators of research programs.

Cristy: I first started working in a research support role in 2009 within the Faculty of Education, providing support to the Associate Dean (Research), administering Faculty

research activities, and providing support for research students, including scheduling confirmation of candidature presentations and processes. I got to know our Education research students quite well and was involved in each of their journeys (to varying degrees) from potential applicant through to graduation. I felt I was doing a good job if I could guide students through the administrative aspects and procedures involved in a doctoral program to minimise their impact and allow students to focus on their research projects. I saw firsthand how the confirmation of candidature process was conceptualised by students, supervisors, panel members, and university administration. I found the skills I had developed in my psychology training (BSci Hons, Psychology) coming in handy during the confirmation of candidature process and when my position description was reviewed, the Faculty added pastoral care to the required duties.

In 2014 I commenced my own PhD study at the USQ within the School of Linguistic, Adult, and Specialist Education. Despite all my insider knowledge, I experienced the confirmation of candidature process as a stressful and almost traumatic event. But, I did find the hints and tips that I had developed over the years useful through the process. I started interrogating aspects of the Faculty processes from a student perspective and made changes to almost all of our processes. I really enjoy my study, but like most students, the journey often takes me off road, there is no single continuous paved and sign posted road to completion.

My current role involves coordinating the team which provides first line support to all university research students, supervisors, and associated staff. This involves reviewing and revising our practices regarding research programs, including the confirmation of candidature process. While my role has changed from being directly involved in confirmation scheduling and being present during student presentations to having more of a function coordination aspect, I am still in contact with research students on a daily basis. I

am involved in the performance management aspect and see the difficulties experienced by students who have not managed to navigate successfully the confirmation process within required timelines. I also review biennial progress reports submitted to the faculties. I enjoy reading these reports where students and supervisors paint a picture of the recent progress, difficulties, and successes (I often wonder if the students and supervisors realise how much is on display in these reports, but perhaps that's for another chapter).

When I present at workshops I often note that it is one thing to know administratively, or intellectually, what is involved throughout confirmation of candidature, but it is an entirely different thing to experience it yourself. My personal journey through this process has provided me with 'insider' knowledge that I am keen to share with other students with an aim to make each student's journey a little easier. However, I do also acknowledge that each student has their own unique research journey and I am by no means trying to imply that what I experienced, or what worked for me, will be what all students experience or find useful.

I first met Douglas when he joined the graduate research office at USQ. We have different research approaches (quantitative and qualitative) and come from different discipline areas (Education and History), but I found in Douglas a kindred spirit who had a holistic view of our research programs and wanted to base administrative decisions on what made sense within a research context. Douglas also understands the sometimes conflicting nature of being a research administrator and student and the scrutiny and pressure that comes from working in an area where you are a student. That's not to say we agree on all things. We have had robust debates about exactly how a policy, process, or administrative action fits within the balance of university needs and the realities of undertaking research within a university degree.

Douglas: *I began working in the research office at USQ in 2010 as a Higher Degree by Research Student Administration Officer. This position involved providing advice and support for research students and enabled me to be a part of hundreds of students' higher degree by research journey. Some of these students I got to know quite well as they made contact with my office on frequent occasions. Others made less contact but I was still aware of them and their particular successes or struggles as I reviewed their progress twice a year through the performance management processes of the university. A major element of this process was confirmation of candidature. As part of my role, I also attended several confirmation seminars and observed the process of panel feedback both verbal and written. I witnessed first-hand the anxiety confirmation brought to research candidates and provided advice to students who were having difficulty passing through this process.*

In 2015, my staff supervisor took long-service leave and I assumed the role of Acting Manager for my section. This role brought with it the responsibility of developing university policy for the confirmation of candidature process. This was something I had been involved with several years earlier when the confirmation of candidature had undergone a major revision in an effort to align the different faculty processes. As inevitably occurs within universities, the bureaucratic wheel turns full circle and so it was time to revisit this policy. On each of these occasions it was clear that the confirmation of candidature means different things to different people. For some, it was a barrier for students to pass through, a test of their project and of themselves as fledgling academics, for others it was a process that enabled students to slowly and comfortably begin to assume the role of academic in a supportive and collegial atmosphere, and for some it was something in between these two. My roles in research administration enabled me to come to understand these competing paradigms and how these can affect students in both positive and negative ways.

During my time as a research administrator I also began my own doctoral studies. In 2012, I started a Doctor of Philosophy at a different institution and so began to understand first hand from the student perspective what I had witnessed so many times from an administrative outlook. This enabled me to compare the different processes and different experiences each institution provided for its students. In terms of confirmation, I began to reflect on my own confirmation when compared to the confirmation process I had observed in my professional role at the USQ. My own confirmation was by no means easy sailing but on the whole the processes and approach of the other institution appeared to be less 'problematic' when compared to my experiences and observations of confirmation of candidature at the USQ.

My experiences of confirmation as a research administrator and as a student have informed this chapter. It is hoped that my reflection on these experiences will assist students, supervisors, research administrators and institutions to better understand the confirmation of candidature process and the role of each of these stakeholders. Perhaps this understanding might assist in some way to improve the process. At the very least, it is hoped that the chapter provides advice on how to manage the confirmation of candidature and how students can maximise the benefits from what should be a positive and formative experience.

Background to the study

Research training in Australia, especially the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), has been influenced historically by the system in the United Kingdom (UK) and therefore follows the mentoring model (Dale, 1997, p. 111; Evans, Macauley, Pearson, & Tregenza, 2003, November). This involves students conducting their research under the guidance of a principal academic supervisor (or advisor) as well as at least one associate supervisor. A significant catalyst for the development of the confirmation of candidature in Australian research training, was the introduction by the Australian Government of specific funding and

accountabilities in this area in the form of the Research Training Scheme (RTS). The RTS initiative was an Australian government grant provided to Australian Higher Education Providers in order to offset domestic HDR students' tuition fees. It has been suggested that the RTS led to the formalisation of the confirmation process across the sector as a compulsory measure to improve and monitor the management of research candidature, ensuring more timely completions and better completion rates (Evans, Evans, & Marsh, 2011). It is important to note that at the time of writing this chapter, Australian universities generally did not require an oral defence (or viva voce) of the final thesis submitted for examination. Confirmation of candidature was often the only time a research student was required to give an oral presentation and respond to questions about their study. However, most Australian universities encourage students to present their research findings at conferences during their candidature. Formal, compulsory Australian confirmation processes are somewhat standard across the sector and usually require:

The acquisition of necessary technical and methodological skills, completion of any required coursework subjects, completion of an adequate amount of research, submission of a significant piece of writing, a public presentation on their project, and an interview by a 'confirmation committee' (Evans et al., 2011, p. 6).

Additional requirements for the student to pass from provisional to fully confirmed candidate may also include the completion of required revisions to a written proposal and a formal written response to the confirmation panel or committee.

Review of the literature

Although there are many studies on doctoral level education in Australia which mention confirmation (see Brien, 2005, December; Denholm & Evans, 2007; Evans et al., 2011; Hamilton, Carson, & Ellison, 2013; Mewburn, 2011; Owens, 2007; van Rensburg & Danaher, 2009), there are few studies that focus on confirmation in any depth or provide

practical information for students. Studies seldom discuss confirmation from a reflective perspective, the student perspective, or the perspective of a Higher Degree Research Administrator. Studies which mention confirmation are generally from the perspective of the research supervisor and effective supervisory practices (see Brien, 2005, December; Danaher & van Rensburg, 2009, April; Denholm & Evans, 2007; Hamilton et al., 2013; James & Baldwin, 1999; Owens, 2007). Studies that provide discussion of confirmation and also consider the doctoral journey from a student perspective include two academics reflecting on their own doctoral journey (Bansel, 2011; Tyler, 2008) and a study conducted at the University of Western Sydney (now Western Sydney University), which examined the impacts of the PhD process from the perspective of full-time PhD students (Mowbray, 2010). While these studies will be important in informing this chapter, their focus was on the whole doctoral journey and not confirmation itself.

As for an administrative perspective, this is usually discussed only in terms of the confirmation providing some structure leading to the pathway for completion. The only research that begins to meaningfully address the issue of doctoral study from the perspective of HDR administrators or administration focuses on administrative paperwork (see Mewburn, Tokareva, Cuthbert, Sinclair, & Barnacle, 2013). As these researchers correctly point out, “administrative paperwork could be called a ‘blind spot’ in the literature on research education” (Mewburn et al., 2013, p. 510). Although their study does not refer to confirmation of candidature directly, its focus is the administrative process of progress reporting, it does highlight the oversight in the literature of the importance of administration in the doctoral process. This chapter begins to illuminate this gap by providing autoethnographic reflections from the perspective of students and administrators on the confirmation of candidature.

Methodology

This project takes a collaborative autoethnographical approach in order to examine the process of the confirmation of candidature. As a type of ethnography, autoethnography is well placed to examine the meaning and effects of confirmation in the lives of HDR research students. Ethnography is a qualitative research method that “usually involves the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews...” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 3). It can be distinguished from other forms of qualitative inquiry in that there is “a more active role assigned to the cognitive modes of observing, watching, seeing, looking at, gazing at and scrutinizing” (Gobo, 2011, p. 15).

Autoethnography differs from ethnography as it involves a reflection on one’s self, rather than other people. With such an approach the researcher can “research themselves in relation to others” and not just realise subjectivity but embrace it as a tool to further understand the social or cultural phenomenon under investigation (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014, p. 17). Autoethnography is “cultural analysis through personal narrative” where “a critical lens” can be established “alongside an introspective and outward one, to make sense of who we are in the context of our cultural communities” (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014, p. 17). This type of approach is not just useful for making sense of the self, the outward cultural gaze also helps “to achieve cultural understanding through analysis and interpretation” so that “autoethnography is not about focusing on self alone, but about searching for understanding of others (culture/society) through self” (Chang, 2016a, p. 48). One of the main benefits of autoethnography is that the researcher is personally invested in the research. This means that they can more clearly articulate and analyse issues related to themselves because they are the

person it actually happened to. The analysis can then be applied more broadly to ‘others’ in relevant cultural contexts.

Although there are benefits in embracing the subjectivity of the autoethnographic approach the limitations of this method are that it can become too insular. Once immersed in the self the researcher as author, researcher, and participant is more prone to losing a sense of objectivity. The risk is that autoethnography privileges the single researcher-participant perspective over all others (Chang, 2016b, p. 111). The objective-subjective dichotomy is not unique to autoethnography but is shared by ethnography more widely (see DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). The issue with autoethnographic approaches is that this is more acute given that the methodology is weighted heavily in favour of the subjective. In order to limit this weakness the research takes a collaborative autoethnographic approach.

Collaborative autoethnography involves two or more researchers combining their individual autoethnographies. Collaboration enables the group “to find some commonalities and differences and then wrestling with these stories to discover the meanings of the stories in relation to their sociocultural contexts” (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013, p. 17). The benefits of using this method are that “author-researcher-participants are encouraged to listen to each other’s voices, examine their own assumptions and challenge other perspectives. The process sharpens their collective interpretation of multiple perspectives and keeps everyone accountable for the process and product” (Chang, 2016b, pp. 111-112). Accountability adds an element of objectivity to the subjective benefits of autoethnography.

Given our personal experiences both as research administrators and as research students, the collaborative autoethnographic method provides a useful lens for examining the self in terms of the confirmation of candidature process. Through autoethnographic practices, this examination of the self and personal experience is used to explore and understand the confirmation of candidature in ways that seek to inform and assist others. By using a

collaborative approach, we seek to balance our individual understanding of self against each other in order to provide a more objective interpretation of the issues and powers at play during the confirmation process.

The confirmation of candidature process in Australia and at the USQ

We conducted a review of the confirmation processes at nine universities across Australia with at least one university from each Australian State or Territory. The data were obtained from information freely available from the universities' web pages. The documents reviewed included policies and formal regulations, information for students, templates, and forms. From the review, we identify five core processes involved with confirmation of candidature, including:

- a written proposal that summarises the proposed research;
- a formal oral presentation of the proposed research;
- formal feedback;
- some form of grading or outcome where candidature is confirmed, extended, or terminated; and
- a time limit on obtaining confirmation of candidature, with candidates generally required to move from provisional to full candidature within the first third of their program time.

Although there is a recognisable core set of processes for confirmation of candidature, each University's process has variations. For example:

- the proposal length is set to different levels across universities and across disciplines within universities;
- the information required in the proposal document varies, for example a project budget, publication outline, and/or ethics statement may, or may not, be required;
- the time allocated for the formal presentation varies from 15 to 45 minutes;

- the confirmation panel may also meet with, or interview, the student and supervisors separately; and
- the feedback may, or may not, be provided on a standard template.

The confirmation of candidature process at the USQ is described below in order to provide a context for the practical advice outlined later in the chapter and to give a specific example of the process at an Australian University. The USQ confirmation process is described under the headings of the five core components common to the universities reviewed.

A written proposal that summarises the proposed research

A formal set of guidelines is provided to candidates which outlines the formatting requirements of the proposal. Students are required to submit a proposal that includes:

- goals of the research study;
- relationship of the work to the current body of knowledge in the discipline area;
- methodologies by which the goals will be addressed; and
- likely outcomes of the work, together with their significance.

An appropriate confirmation of candidature panel is convened for each student. The panel consists of at least three doctorally qualified members who collectively have expertise in the proposed theoretical/conceptual framework, methodologies, content, context, or other areas relevant to the proposed research.

A formal presentation of the proposed research

The student presents an oral summary of their proposed research at a forum advertised, and open, to all University students and staff. This is currently the only oral defence of the thesis as there is no viva voce at the end of candidature. The length of the student presentation varies between discipline areas and ranges from 30 to 45 minutes. The presentation is followed by a discussion ranging from 30 minutes to an hour, depending on

the discipline area. The confirmation panel chair facilitates the forum. Normally the panel will ask any questions at the beginning of the discussion before inviting the audience to contribute.

Cristy: The full confirmation proposal is due to be submitted at least two weeks prior to the oral presentation. One of the jobs in our office is to follow up with students who have not met this timeline. I don't think that student's always realise the importance of providing their written proposal in a timely manner to allow the panel suitable time to read and digest the information presented. Submitting late documents is an easy way to annoy a busy panel. From an administrative perspective, it can be quite difficult to find a time for the presentation that is suitable for the panel members, supervisory team, and the candidate. Each person involved in the process has competing demands on their time and we are required as administrators to herd the team together for the presentation.

Douglas: I think it is important to note that as administrators the focus is getting several different busy people all together at the same time within the confirmation due date deadline. The difficulty of this can be compounded by students submitting late proposals, the unavailability of panel members at certain times of year and the number of presentations that might need to be scheduled at any given time. For this reason it is suggested that students (and supervisors) prepare well in advance and have contingencies in place to negate unexpected delays. Although students (and their supervisors) have a responsibility to plan ahead for the unexpected it is also imperative that research administrators minimise delays and ensure that the appropriate systems and supports are in place to mitigate the stress and impact caused when confirmation presentations have to be postponed.

Formal feedback

The formal written feedback from the panel is submitted to the student approximately one week after the oral presentation. The feedback is provided on a standard template and

includes expert and constructive advice about the proposed project, the scope and feasibility of the project, and the appropriateness of the theoretical approach, methodology, and/or experimental design.

The confirmation panel are tasked with assessing whether the student and their supervisors have:

- appropriate university support;
- a clear outline of a thesis topic which constitutes an original contribution to knowledge;
- an understanding of the potential significance of the work; and
- determined the methodologies by which the work will be undertaken.

In their written feedback, the confirmation of candidature panel may recommend that candidature be confirmed without revisions required. However, in most cases the panel requires the candidate to provide a written response to the report and a revised proposal. The panel provides an outcome of confirmation grade in line with the university's examination outcome grades. That is, Pass, Pass with minor revisions, Pass with major revisions, Resubmit, or Fail and recommend candidature be terminated.

In the majority of cases, candidature is confirmed after the student responds to the written feedback from the panel. In a number of cases the panel will require the candidate to engage more fully with the feedback and resubmit a further revised response and proposal. In these cases the candidate may be granted a three-month extension in order to complete the confirmation of candidature process. In a small number of cases the panel may recommend that the student's candidature be terminated as the student has not demonstrated that their proposed research is of an appropriate scope, is feasible, has appropriate methodologies, and/or will contribute new knowledge.

Cristy: *In nearly all cases at USQ, the candidates who engage with the confirmation process progress to have their candidature confirmed. However, there are rare cases when a student does not successfully progress through the confirmation process. Some candidates will continue to engage with the confirmation process and cycle through the revisions and panel feedback loop without making any progress. Recommending a termination of candidature is something we avoid as much as possible, however there have been a handful of cases where it seems that the candidate is unaware of their lack of progress.*

Douglas: *It is always unfortunate when candidature is discontinued. As an administrative process though, termination of candidature does serve a purpose. It ensures that students are not spending large amounts of time working towards something that in the opinion of a number of experienced researchers, will not result in a passable thesis. Quite often this has nothing to do with a student's ability, but is usually related to particular circumstances the student is experiencing at the time. In fact, some students return to the program at a later date and successfully pass through confirmation the second time around. Confirmation of candidature provides a means for the institution to resolve these issues at an early stage of the candidature rather than have a student struggle all the way to the end and fail at examination due to a fundamental issue. It is the responsibility of administrators to have processes, with checks and balances, in place to ensure that the institution gets it right when recommending termination of candidature.*

The confirmation of candidature process internationally

We conducted a brief review of the confirmation processes (or equivalent) at universities in New Zealand, the UK, and the USA. The data were obtained from information freely available from the universities' web pages. Each university we sampled has an embedded process for reviewing a student's proposed research, with the confirmation process (sometimes called a *Provisional Year Review*) in New Zealand universities showing

equivalence to the Australian confirmation process. Each of the sampled universities in the UK where students enrol into a doctoral program at the beginning of their studies also has a confirmation process similar to Australian universities. However, a number of UK universities initially admit all new research students into a Master of Philosophy program. These students undergo a formal *upgrade* process if they wish to articulate to a doctoral program. The upgrade process is similar to the confirmation of candidature process observed in Australian universities, with a written component and a formal review. The timing of the upgrade process is quite variable, with some universities in the UK commencing the process as early as 8 months into the program, while others only require that the process be completed before the end of the second full-time year.

Universities in the USA have a different structure in their PhD programs. Students applying for entry into doctoral programs in Australia, New Zealand, or the UK are required to submit an initial research proposal, or outline, with their application. Universities in the USA however, do not require a research proposal as part of the application process. PhD students at universities in the USA normally undertake coursework study in the first two years of the program. This is followed by an examination process, often called *Comprehensive Exams* or *General Exams*. A formal review of the proposed research is undertaken during this examination process, with a written research proposal submitted for Faculty review. Students are required to successfully complete all aspects of the examination process before commencing the research component of the program. While we observed variations in the timing, requirements of the written document, and requirement for an oral presentation; every university we reviewed had a formal process for reviewing and evaluating the proposed research of their students.

Confirmation of candidature: A rationale

Our aim in this section is to provide a rationale for the confirmation of candidature process and to answer the ‘why do I have to do this?’ question. The prospect of undergoing confirmation of candidature can be intimidating for many HDR students. Their anxiety can be related to a number of factors, including a dichotomy of identity produced by confirmation and the process being described in antagonistic terms such as ‘thesis defence’.

Mewburn (2011) discusses the different identities assumed by PhD candidates during what she terms the *ritual of confirmation*. Mewburn emphasises the dichotomy of identity necessary during the confirmation of candidature presentation where the student must make “the identity of ‘student’ learner and ‘unknower’ available at the same time as ‘professional academic’ a knower and teller, rather than a learner” (p. 329). It is not surprising that students feel apprehension at the prospect of confirmation where these dual identities can come into play in unpredictable and unexpected ways.

Douglas: *I experienced this dichotomy of identity in my own confirmation of candidature. It was a strange realisation that out of all the people in the room I was the most knowledgeable on this topic and everyone was just waiting for me to tell them what this was all about. It was my understanding that was important and that they were going to judge me on that understanding even though my understanding was greater than theirs. Did that make me one part student and two parts fledgling academic or two parts student and one part fledgling academic? I think in hindsight it was more like fifty-fifty and my identity as academic or student fluctuated during different parts of the presentation. Having experienced this dichotomy it is easy to see how it is perplexing for students and part of the reason why confirmation can be quite daunting. I think it also offers great opportunities, though, and is a glimpse of the road ahead as fully-fledged academic where the tensions between knower and unknower continue to play out in increasingly productive ways.*

At confirmation, the student is expected to present their project in a knowledgeable manner and to demonstrate expertise in their discipline. In doing so, the student assumes the role of 'professional academic'. At the same time, however, confirmation questions this role as it requires more senior 'professional academics' as panel members and other confirmation presentation attendees to provide instruction and feedback on the viability of the research project. It is the interrogation of the project and academic/student role that we believe creates the most angst for students. The level of anxiety is concordant with the way in which confirmation feedback is provided, which itself is dependent on the way in which confirmation is conceptualised.

The level of anxiety created by confirmation also depends on how it is conceptualised by the institution, the student, their supervisors, the confirmation panel members, and members of the audience. One traditional form of conceptualising the confirmation has been that of thesis defence. In this case the student is required to defend the right to the role of 'professional academic' by proving that the project is valid, achievable and academically rigorous. One of the members of Douglas' supervisory team joked that a sword would be necessary in the confirmation of candidature presentation to defend his project and the approach he proposed to take. The joke literalising defence was apt. As his project investigated the revival of Western Martial Arts, a sword would not have been out of place in the confirmation presentation. Yet we suggest that academics should be cautious with humour around what can be genuinely daunting to students, and should be aware that their task throughout confirmation is to uphold the process as one of student development rather than endorse or maintain antagonistic models of attack and defence. We have witnessed examples where the candidate would have been well advised to carry some form of protection from the feedback provided by academics at the confirmation. These approaches to feedback required the student to defend themselves and their project from what one would hope were

well meaning, but nonetheless vigorous, attacks that can seem tantamount to bullying. As one doctoral student commented when reflecting on confirmation:

The actual experience brought out individuals who appeared to see my presentation as an opportunity to widen any conceptual and methodological holes, which I may not have filled, into chasms. It reminded me of those individuals who tended to use opportunities such as this to privilege their own voices (Tyler, 2008, p. 9).

Tyler also mentions, though, that the experience brought out other academics willing to engage with him and his proposed project in ways that “offered support and scaffolding” (Tyler, 2008, p. 9). Although a supportive approach is more desirable than rigorous critique that calls for the thesis defence, both approaches do provide benefits for the development of the student’s proposed project. These benefits provide a rationale as to why it is in a student’s best interest to undergo confirmation as part of their candidature.

Confirmation of candidature has the potential to provide additional ‘expert’ advice to the supervisory team and initiate the writing process. Each of these result in strengthening the research and increasing the likelihood of timely completion. Confirmation can ensure the quality of the project before data is collected, any substantial writing occurs, or the thesis is examined. Hamilton et al. (2013, p. 11) suggest in relation to all milestones, including confirmation, that “through critical engagement, milestones can become a fundamental part of strengthening the final product before examination”. We also view confirmation as a powerful tool in strengthening the student’s chances of successfully completing the research journey.

The objectivity of the confirmation of candidature process provides an opportunity for expertise outside of the student’s supervisory team to be provided, not only ensuring greater rigour in the project, but also having the potential to inject other possibilities and productive directions. This is most important for students who are not studying at the university campus

as these students may not have convenient access to additional expert advice relevant to their proposed research. We have also observed that not all supervisors are comfortable with their students seeking advice outside the supervisory team. Douglas has discussed this issue with many students who were very hesitant to seek advice from outside of their supervisory team or had somehow acquired the impression that their supervisor did not approve of this type of behaviour. The advantage of the confirmation process is that it requires outside input, ensures that this happens, and normalises a wider community of practice.

In our own experience of the doctoral degree in its broadest sense, students underestimate the amount of time the writing of the thesis can take and spend too much time on the literature review, data collection, and data analysis before starting the writing. These are all important aspects of the research process, but must be undertaken with the realisation that the production of a thesis will need to become the focus of the endeavour. The confirmation, requiring a written document, can assist in establishing this focus early in the candidature and in many cases the final confirmation proposal can form the basis of the introduction, literature review and methodology chapters of the thesis.

The benefits of a formally administrated confirmation process, discussed above, assist in the production of a thesis and the development of the skills required of a researcher. From an administrative perspective though, a benefit of a confirmation process scheduled to occur within the first third of the degree is that timely completion of confirmation is likely to lead to timely completion of the degree (Denholm & Evans, 2007). There appears to be an audit culture within the Australian HDR domain with confirmation of candidature established to ensure students complete in a timely manner (Bansel, 2011). The confirmation process requires students to demonstrate their ability to write a cohesive proposal and plan a suitable project. Without this step, the first real assessment of a student's ability to complete their degree would be at thesis submission. Having a confirmation milestone in the first third of

the program allows the student, the supervisory team, and the university to assess the student's capacity to complete the degree.

Douglas: *In my own experience I don't think this point can be stressed enough. Although as a student I recognised the benefits of confirmation in strengthening the research, as an administrator there were also benefits in that confirmation was an official milestone which allowed me to gauge student progress and initiate performance management processes if necessary. These would usually provide remedial support for the student useful in getting them back on track but in certain cases would facilitate the student's exit from the program. In this way confirmation was beneficial as an objective administrative measuring stick to monitor performance and instigate actions as appropriate. Obviously, confirmation has benefits for the institution in that it is an administrative mechanism to maximise the number of completions but it also benefits the student. The earlier a student can successfully undertake confirmation the more time they have to complete other elements of the research. I know for myself, I underestimated the amount of time the final thesis writing process would take and was grateful for confirmation as an administrative process that assisted in getting the research moving. In my opinion, overly critical observations of confirmation as only part of an autocratic university audit culture are unnecessary and only exist as self-fulfilling prophecies based on the perceptions of the observer. My experiences of confirmation of candidature as both student and administrator are that it benefits the institution and the student. It is a useful process that, **in all forms**, enhances the research experience.*

Cristy: *As an administrator, I saw a small proportion of students engage with the process and then decide to withdraw, once they realised the workload required to successfully complete the confirmation process and the research itself. Confirmation provides a critical point where students need to determine if they are willing and able to commit the time required. There have been cases where administrative suggestions to*

withdraw have been met with relief. Sometimes it seems that students just need someone to say 'I don't think you can do this right now' to generate action. Other students found that this suggestion to withdraw has spurred them into action and commitment to their research study.

At the USQ the confirmation process is intended to assist the student in producing an examinable thesis. This is done, in part, by reviewing whether the student and their supervisors have appropriate university and Faculty support. It also requires the student to develop a clear project outline with anticipated contributions to knowledge, an understanding of the potential significance of the work, and appropriate methodologies by which the work will be undertaken. From a practical perspective, we have both found that it forced us to write and to plan our studies in a meaningful way.

When reflecting on our conversations with other research students, a number of positive aspects of the confirmation process are often acknowledged:

- a) Confirmation provides a specific milestone to achieve and provides some structure to what is a generally unstructured program of study. Students indicated that having a goal (even a relatively broad goal of confirmation) to work towards in the first third of their program helps them transition to the unstructured nature of research degrees.
- b) The confirmation process has forced decision making and focus within their study, when they could have continued the initial exploratory phases of the project unchecked.
- c) The confirmation proposal document forces students to write about their study and often provides material that can be included in the final thesis document. Students often comment on this aspect of confirmation when they are towards the end of their degree and focusing on thesis writing.

Students will often acknowledge that they did not necessarily appreciate the role of the confirmation process until the process was completed and they were progressing with their research.

Cristy: The process has forced me to write not just notes, but formal polished work for my supervisors' review. It has focused my attention on aligning my research questions, theoretical framework, methodology, and proposed analyses. Without the time requirement on this process, I could easily have continued reading and thinking about my project without having written a single word or taken any steps towards actually commencing the study.

Douglas: My confirmation of candidature occurred several years ago and seems like a distant memory. I can still recall how the somewhat daunting process was of great benefit to my project and my academic experience. The confirmation allowed me to discuss my proposed topic in a formal setting with others outside of my supervisory team. This enabled me to get a variety of opinions on my proposed approach and assisted to confirm that both I and more importantly my supervisors were all on the right track. It was also a good opportunity to practice the skills of presenting my research and gave me an added boost of confidence to present my findings at several conferences. Through my own personal experiences of confirmation I understand the apprehension and the anxiety students feel but I am also aware of the role confirmation plays in empowering students and validating the research they undertake.

As Douglas mentions above, the oral presentation is also an opportunity for the student to develop skills in presenting their research at conferences and other forums where an oral presentation, with or without visual aids such as PowerPoint slides, is required. Being able to present and answer questions about their research concisely and clearly is an important skill for researchers wishing to share their research with others. It is also the aspect of the confirmation of candidature process that invokes the most uncertainty or anxiety.

Cristy: I didn't sleep well the night before my presentation. I kept rehearsing how I would deflect difficult questions and provide answers to alternative questions as if I were a politician preparing for a press conference. I wasn't concerned about the presentation of my proposed research; what created anxiety were the unknown questions that would be posed. What if I couldn't answer a question, or worse... what if I didn't even understand the question? I reminded myself that my confirmation forum was one hour out of my life and that whatever happened I would survive the hour and would recover from it.

Douglas: Initially, I was not concerned about the presentation of my confirmation document. I had rehearsed my presentation and responses to potential questions many times. I had experience as a teacher and lecturer in my previous career and had given many presentations before. I knew my topic and I was an experienced presenter. What did I have to worry about? Little did I know that I would literally choke on those words. Whether it was subconscious anxiety or trying to fit too many words into my allocated twenty minute presentation slot, things did not go as smoothly as I had planned. It turns out that what I should have been concerned about was a progressively dry mouth and throat that continued to constrict until it incapacitated me. It got so acute that I had to call a stop to the presentation in order to revive myself. Luckily, a very helpful School Research Co-ordinator offered to get me some water, which helped immensely. What didn't help was my supervisor insisting that we not lose the momentum of the presentation and that people ask some questions while the water was still on its way. I managed to squeeze out somewhat coherent answers to these questions before the water arrived. Refreshed and able to speak freely again I continued with my presentation which went on without a hitch. It just goes to show that you can never be too prepared and the unexpected can happen. But in the overall scheme of things, even with this setback, everything was alright and I passed through my confirmation.

Strategies for HDR Students

Preparing your proposal

Start writing as soon as possible. Write notes from the literatures as you read (this can form the basis of your literature review). Writing early also gives your supervisors more time to provide feedback on your content as well as your writing style and format. If your discipline has a style manual, use it from the beginning. Be familiar with the confirmation of candidature and proposal guidelines from your University/discipline area. This is likely to provide the areas to be covered in a proposal, any required style of formatting, as well as a page/word limit. Your confirmation panel will also have this information.

Cristy: I copied the proposal guidelines into my document before I started writing. This gave me a framework for writing and provided a focus to my reading. I wish that I had started this process much earlier. I had spent a lot of time reading and thinking, but wasn't really progressing. It wasn't until I created my proposal document that I started to be more strategic in my reading and actually started writing anything. If I could go back in time and give myself one study tip, it would be to start the proposal document as soon as I had a general idea of what my study was going to be.

Douglas: Similar to Cristy, I wish I had started the writing of my confirmation document earlier. Throughout my doctoral studies I found that the writing process is important for formulating ideas and informing the planning and structuring of the thesis. Starting writing as I was reading the literature and planning my proposal document assisted greatly with this process. At my institution the proposal is a very short document, only three thousand words. I found it challenging to write such a brief proposal. My original document, around six thousand words, was well over this. After revising my document several times, I managed to reduce it to the required word length. Writing such a short

proposal was a good lesson in writing concisely and proved to be good practice for the writing of the thesis chapters.

Advice for students writing the proposal includes:

- Know what is required by your University and by your discipline.
- You should be referencing key theories, seminal literatures, and current publications.
- Focus on identifying the research gap, how you will fill this gap (methodology) and the significance of addressing this gap. This is how you demonstrate your research will provide a significant and original contribution to knowledge.
- If there is a word/page limit, make sure you do not exceed it.
- Correctly format the document. When academics are reviewing a large number of documents a consistent format makes the process easier.
- Proofread your document carefully. Have a critical friend also proofread the document.

The oral presentation

In reflecting on our own experiences of confirmation, it is evident that there are a number of strategies that can reduce the anxiety of the presentation and question time. Practice the presentation in front of other people. Practising alone will help with becoming comfortable with the presentation, but practising in front of other people more closely replicates the actual confirmation presentation and can lead to a more polished presentation. Feedback from supervisors, colleagues, and friends will all help to shape the presentation. Where possible, have a look at the room layout and have a run through of the room technologies. Having a practice run in the room of the presentation is ideal. It is also advisable to attend at least one other confirmation presentation in the relevant discipline area several months before confirmation. This will assist to familiarise you with the realities of an actual presentation.

Cristy: I practiced what I was going to say in front of the mirror and to the cat initially. And while the cat appeared to appreciate my research it wasn't until I practiced in front of my supervisors that I got some invaluable feedback. I then took the plunge and invited/coerced some colleagues to a practice run and this is when I really added some polish to the presentation. This really pushed me out of my comfort zone and felt even more unnatural than an actual presentation, but I am very glad that I pushed myself to do it. My colleagues gave me the gift of their time and provided supportive feedback and I am very grateful to them. My preparation helped reduce my anxiety relating to the tension of needing to know what I was talking about and also being a novice researcher/learner. I went in to my confirmation presentation knowing that the presentation part was going to be okay.

As was described in the personal reflection of Cristy above, one of the most common areas of anxiety for students undertaking the confirmation of candidature presentation is how to deal with feedback during question time. This anxiety is usually related to the fear of not being able to answer a question or having an academic take an overly critical approach.

Douglas: Although the presentation of my research during the confirmation of candidature went very well and academics took a very constructive and collegial approach to giving feedback I am fully aware of less constructive approaches. One of the student's presenting before me was given a particularly gruesome 'grilling' by an academic who took issue with the overall relevance of the research and repeatedly asked the same question. Stumbling to respond to such an attack on the fundamental credibility of their work the student continued to attempt to answer the question with decreasing levels of success. From my own experience of confirmation at the UQ and having been present at USQ student confirmations, my advice in such situations is that a student not get too involved in a question they find difficult answering. Provide an answer, clarify if necessary, and then move on. I would suggest students have a pen with them so that they can make a note of the point raised

and then consider it later within their supervisory team. The physical act of writing the point down and confirming a follow up can assist in deflecting non-constructive approaches to feedback. I used this in my confirmation presentation and find that it continues to be a useful strategy for conference presentations.

There are many good publications available that discuss presentation skills. We would suggest that students make use of these types of resources. Some hints and tips directly related to our own experiences of confirmation of candidature as students and as research administrators are listed below.

- Practice your presentation alone and with an audience. Make sure you are within the time limit prescribed and that you are comfortable with technical terms and researchers' names.
- Do not rush the presentation; take your time to explain each point carefully.
- You can read your presentation from a script but it can be better to avoid reading and speak directly to your audience while maintaining good eye contact.
- Frame the presentation as a conversation with friends and colleagues rather than as a speech or monologue.
- Try to speak naturally.
- Keep the presentation slides simple and uncluttered. Avoid too much text, busy fonts with multiple colours, effects, animated transitions, and sounds etc.
- Avoid having more than three points on a slide.
- Number your slides so that people can refer to slide numbers in their questions or in the written feedback.
- Bring a friend if that will help you. For some it can be useful to have a friendly face in the audience. For others this can add to the stress of presenting.

- Talk to other students and your supervisors about their experiences of confirmation of candidature presentations.
- Familiarise yourself with the room you will be presenting in. Practise where you will stand, check the audio-visual equipment and where the audience and panel will be seated.
- Go to other confirmation of candidature presentations to see the process in action.
- Have water with you when you are presenting.
- Have a friend at your presentation as a timekeeper, letting you know when you have 5, 10, 20 minutes remaining.
- Prepare answers to possible questions.
- Be genuine in your responses to questions.
- Take a pen so that you can note any questions or suggestions made at your presentation. You might also like to have some friends at the presentation that can assist you to write down this information.
- If you cannot answer a question be sure to note it down and indicate that you will investigate that option/idea/theory further at a later date.
- Remember – the presentation is only a short period of your life. No matter how well or poorly it goes the sun will still shine tomorrow.

Responding to the written feedback

We strongly suggest that you make sure you understand the revision process and what is required before you commence. In most cases you will be required to respond in writing to the feedback and indicate if you have made the suggested change or provide a rationale for not making the change or only partly incorporating the feedback. This process of review and feedback is almost a mirror (although a smaller version) of the examination process at most universities. Therefore, the confirmation revision process is good practise for the phases that

will occur after the examination of the thesis and later when responding to reviewers' comments on submission of journal articles.

Do not give your confirmation panel a reason to send the proposal back for further revision. They have invested considerable time in making suggestions and so it is correct academic etiquette to address all of them. The suggestions included below are based on our administrative observations of reasons why panels do not accept a revised proposal. Often students report feeling pressured to respond quickly, yet our advice is to take the appropriate time to review the response before submission. The additional time spent is a good investment if it means that candidature is confirmed without the panel asking for further revisions or responses.

Correct any typographical, formatting, and grammatical errors highlighted in the panel feedback. While it is much better to avoid any of those errors in your document in the first place, if some have slipped through and the panel have taken the time to highlight them for you, make sure you correct them. Often the panel will check whether typographical errors have been addressed before looking any further. If those changes have not been made, the panel may send your proposal back without reading how you have addressed more substantial feedback. You will have breached academic etiquette that requires repaying time spent on feedback by acknowledging it and responding to it adequately.

Respond to all items of feedback that require a response. The length of your response will vary depending on the item of feedback. Some responses may be a short acknowledgment that the suggestion has been adopted with reference to page numbers in the proposal. Other responses may be a more detailed theoretical rationale as to why the suggestion does not fit within the chosen theoretical framework.

The panel feedback template at the USQ provides headings such as:

- proposal formatting;

- focus of the study and research questions;
- literature review and scope;
- outcome and significance;
- methodology;
- timelines;
- resources required;
- oral presentation;
- additional comments; and
- overall assessment / outcome.

We observed a similar pattern in the type of feedback that panel members, or reviewers, would be expected to provide to students at other Australian universities. However, not all universities prescribed specific feedback headings.

You are writing for busy people and should make it as easy as possible for them to see that you have responded to everything they raised. Provide a clear indication that you have engaged with their feedback. The confirmation panel do not necessarily expect you to adopt all of their suggestions, but they will expect you to consider their feedback and make a professional response. Table 1 provides a possible format for your responses. Following the advice outlined above demonstrates your appreciation for the time and effort the panel have given you by providing feedback on your proposal. It is also important to write your revisions in a polite and courteous style and acknowledge the assistance the panel have provided by thanking them appropriately.

Table 1: Example format for response to panel feedback

Panel comment	Response	Page numbers
Typographical errors are highlighted on the document	Errors corrected.	6, 8, 9
Inconsistent referencing in reference list	References reviewed and updated.	22 - 25
Theory XYZ is a possible theory to consider to explain the mechanism of ABC phenomena.	While XYZ theory provides one perspective on the mechanisms involved in ABC, this study will focus on the DEF theory which explains the process from a ...	N/A
The article by Smith and Smith 2017 provides another perspective of XYZ that you should consider.	Thank you for this reference. I have incorporated the Smith and Smith perspective in my introduction to XYZ.	6, 10, 24

Where appropriate, we recommend that you work closely with your supervisors when drafting your response and revised proposal. We appreciate that students are not always comfortable letting their supervisors know that they need assistance (see, for example, Manathunga, 2005). However, their expertise can be invaluable as you engage with your panel feedback and throughout the entire confirmation of candidature process. Perhaps our most important suggestion is to keep the feedback in perspective. Unless you have received an outright fail, the panel are acknowledging that your proposed research has merit. You

have more work to do on your proposal, but if you engage with the feedback in a meaningful way you are likely to have your candidature confirmed.

Cristy: I gained invaluable feedback from my panel. As a result of the feedback I changed one of the instruments used in my study and reduced the number of hypotheses I was testing. I am genuinely thankful to my confirmation panel for taking the time to consider my proposed research and provide me with feedback. While I thanked the panel at the time, the more I progress with my research project the more I appreciate the feedback that I received and how it has made my job of conducting research and writing a thesis that much easier. I don't want to make this process of undertaking a doctorate any harder than it has to be.

Final thoughts

In reflecting on each stage of the confirmation of candidature, as students and as administrators, there are many ways the student has influence and agency in this process. How the process is framed will influence how the student interprets his or her experiences. Although we cannot necessarily control how those around us interpret the process, we do have control over how we interpret the process. As students, supervisors, panel members, and research administrators we have the power to conceptualise confirmation of candidature in positive and constructive ways that enhance and enrich the experience of all involved.

Cristy: On reflection I acknowledge that I constructed a stressful confirmation process for myself. I had placed an expectation on myself that I had to know everything related (even peripherally) to my study and that I had to be an expert. This level of expectation led me to develop and practice a tightly constructed presentation, and my presentation went according to my expectations. However, this self-inflicted requirement to be an expert led to anxiety about the question time after my presentation. I interpreted a minor suggestion or comment as an indicator of my inadequacy. I perceived the written feedback in an entirely different way, thanks to my Principal Supervisor. He embraced the feedback and saw it as a gift. I

reconstructed my view of the feedback and approached it in a much more positive way. I can now honestly say that I am grateful to my confirmation panel for their feedback and my study is now stronger because I engaged with their feedback.

From the critical reflections of our experiences we would suggest that supervisors, administrators, and students consider the following points.

- Confirmation of candidature may go smoothly or the student may experience difficulties. Some of the difficulties may be out of the student's control and more related to dichotomies of identity or the ways in which the process is framed as thesis defence.
- Confirmation of candidature can be conceptualised as a defence against a barrier of experts or as a constructive and collegial experience. We all have the power to frame confirmation positively and influence those around us, and the process itself, to be perceived as more collegial than antagonistic.
- How students frame confirmation for themselves, their role and agency, influences how they perceive the process. Students are encouraged to embrace and fully engage with the process as a positive collegial experience.
- The confirmation of candidature formalises research progression and assists in progressing the research project to the next stage. This makes confirmation of candidature a positive process for administrators, supervisors and students.
- The confirmation of candidature process is paralleled in many academic review practices. For example, it follows the format of the academic conference presentation and submitting publications for peer review. Confirmation is an important process that assists students in learning and experiencing the conventions of academia.

- Students undergoing confirmation of candidature should not be too hard on themselves. The purpose of conducting the research after confirmation is to find the answers and fill the research gap. Students at confirmation should not be expected to know all of the answers. If they did, there would be no point in undertaking the research.

Conclusion

The chapter used an autoethnographic approach to examine the process of confirmation of candidature through our reflections as research administrators and HDR students. These reflections were based on our personal experiences and the accumulated observation of many individual circumstances over more than eight years. We found that although students realised the benefits of confirmation as a formal milestone, it was usually only *after* they had completed the process that the benefits were fully understood. It is important to realise that the stresses experienced by students are very real during confirmation even when the benefits are known. Strategies to assist students undertake confirmation and help reduce anxiety were provided and their relevance elucidated through personal reflection. These strategies included advice covering each of the main aspects of confirmation - preparing the proposal, the oral presentation, and responding to written feedback. It is hoped that the reflections and information provided will be of benefit to research administrators, supervisors and, most importantly, students.

For administrators, there are important institutional aspects to consider in terms of confirmation of candidature as a process of compliance and timely completion, but research administrators should also consider the very real tensions and anxieties that students experience. Administrative systems and most importantly the ways in which research administrators apply these systems should take this into account. The chapter provides an opportunity for research supervisors to reflect on their own teaching practice and inform the

pedagogies of research supervision. It is hoped that the information in the chapter might encourage or support supervisors in their efforts to assist themselves, colleagues, and their own students to approach confirmation of candidature as a collegial and empowering experience. And finally, the individual student does have power and agency in this process. Although the best scenario is one in which the institution, administrators, and university academics construct empowering and respectful confirmation of candidature events, the realities can often fall short of this. You, as the student, are in control of how you perceive the process. Pay no attention to negative constructions of confirmation of candidature. The way you approach the confirmation process will influence how you experience it and what you get out of it. You have the power to perceive the confirmation of candidature as an ordeal or as an empowering learning event. It is hoped that the reflections and advice in this chapter result in more chance of experiencing the latter.

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