QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

WRITING A CONFIRMATION DOCUMENT

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Please contact Stephen Cox with any suggestions for improvement or additions to this document.
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Background.

A candidate for the degree of PhD is required to complete successfully a planned research program that will result in the candidate making a significant individual contribution to the body of knowledge. This contribution may be in the form of new knowledge or of significant and original adaptation, application and interpretation of existing knowledge. The Confirmation of Candidature process includes three aspects:

(i) **Confirmation document.** The formal Confirmation of Candidature report is a research proposal. It outlines the proposed course of research. The document should include a written report on progress to date, including an outline of the full course of study, and details of coursework completed and grades obtained;

(ii) **A seminar presentation** as part of an oral defence of the proposed thesis research project. The length of the seminar is a 40-minute presentation from the candidate and 20 minutes of questions from the panel and the audience. The panel may request the candidate remain for further questions.

(iii) **Assessment by a review panel.** At the conclusion of the presentation, the panel will meet to deliberate on approving the Confirmation of Candidature into the PhD program. The review panel will advise the student of the decision at the conclusion of the panel discussion, and in turn provide the candidate with a written report and make a recommendation to the University’s Research Degrees Committee of their recommendations.

The aim of the Confirmation of Candidature process is to evaluate the capacity of the candidate to complete a PhD, and to assess that the proposed research program is suitable for a PhD. **There are two main areas of evaluation:** the soundness of the theoretical propositions, or content of the proposed thesis; and the soundness of the methods to be used within the research. Both of these areas need to be of an adequate standard for confirmation as a PhD candidate to be granted.

1. **Confirmation Document.**

The proposal should be structured using a structure similar to the final thesis. Each section should cover the essential elements that would typically be found in a thesis, (recognising many elements would be covered in a sketchy or preliminary way at this stage). It would usually be no more than approximately 50 pages in length, not including bibliography/reference list and appendices. (The length varies among faculties and schools. Documents of excessive length do not necessarily demonstrate superior scholarship: they may in fact indicate the opposite!)

The specific section headings included in the confirmation document are not necessarily fixed. The sections suggested here and by other University guidelines do not always fit easily into the flow of any particular research program. It is important that you decide the best structure for your document in conjunction with your supervisor. What is important is that you address all the information required in a coherent, logical proposal.

The document is a research proposal. To this end, it should provide an argument and overall rationale for your proposed research. This is achieved by:

1. Critically evaluating the literature most relevant to your topic of inquiry such that your specific question is well situated within the literature and the gap you intend to address is clearly identified.
2. Describing and defending a method(s) that will allow appropriate data to be collected that will address the question. You must argue for the rigor of your proposed method, and show that it is achievable within the resources that are available to you.
3. Describing a technique(s) that is appropriate for the analysis of any data collected such that it answers the question.

Introduction.

The introduction needs to state the objectives of the program, include definitions of the key concepts and variables and a brief outline of the background, models and research approach. The aim of this should be to contextualize the proposed research. After reading the introduction, it should be apparent what the aims of the research are, why it is useful, the general literature and theory base in which it is situated, and the general research approach to be employed. (Approximately 3-5 pages).

Literature and Theory Review.

There are disciplinary differences in how literature and theory treated. Some disciplines have separate treatments, in which one the ‘literature review’ primarily focuses upon empirical results reported in the literature, and the theory section critically discusses the theoretical positioning of the proposed research. Other disciplines combine the two, with existing empirical results critically discussed within the theoretical position(s) of the research to be conducted. Whichever approach is taken, there are two foci which confirmation documents will normally include: a critical review of relevant, existing empirical work, and a critical examination of appropriate theories that inform the research.

It is expected that this section will be a succinct version (approximately 25-30 pages) of the literature review / theories chapters of the thesis. The theory and literature review should demonstrate a thorough knowledge of the area and provide arguments to support the study focus. The aim of the literature and theory review is to set up the research questions. The literature review should:

1. Critically evaluate the empirical and theoretical literature rather than merely describe previous literature.
2. Be integrated rather than being more like an annotated bibliography.
3. Identify key authors and the key works in the area.
4. Clearly identify the gap in the literature that is being addressed, including the theoretical, empirical and practical contributions.
5. Constitute an argument.

Research Question(s).

This section requires an explicit statement of the hypotheses, propositions, or research question, and how they are derived from existing theory and literature. It is sometimes easier to introduce research questions progressively throughout the literature review, while for other projects, research questions are most usefully stated after the literature review. Research questions need to be shown to be examining new issues, or examining known issues in novel or better ways. The section should also demonstrate the contribution of the research to the field, and be stated in a way that leads to the methodology. This section should:

1. Clearly link back to the theories and constructs developed in the literature review.
2. Clearly link any relationships among the constructs back to the development of those relationships in the literature and theory review.
3. For research that is empirical, they should state questions that are testable or able to be examined through empirical research.

The adequacy of the introduction, literature review and research question will be judged on the following criteria:

1. The thoroughness of the literature review. Is it of the coverage of, although not necessarily as detailed as, an essentially completed thesis?
2. The clarity of the relationship between the literature review and the research question.
3. The theoretical and practical implications of the research. A PhD will often have both theoretical and practical implications, although the balance will vary. Some projects will be formal evaluations of programs (e.g., clinical interventions; organisational programs, etc) with obvious practical implications. Normally, the theoretical basis for the proposed intervention would be well articulated in the document.

Methods.

The methods section (approximately 10 pages) is where documents from various disciplines will diverge most. Not all PhDs collect primary empirical data and, for those that do, that data will vary greatly in form and technique. Therefore the issues appropriate for each document will vary. The following describes issues for evidence based research. This will apply to many theses in most faculties, but not all. It is acknowledged that the PhD is a research training degree, and that candidates’ knowledge may be limited at the time of candidature.

Practice based research / Non-evidence based projects.

Some PhD projects do not collect evidence in the usual sense of the word but, rather, construct or apply knowledge in other ways. These are most commonly in the production of artistic works, writing an exegesis, and the writing of a theoretical thesis. A theoretical thesis proposal would usually outline the analytical tools that you intend to use in the enquiry, and with a rationale for their appropriateness. This might include the major areas of enquiry and the analytical tools and perspectives that you intend to use to unpack each area.

Evidence based research.

Evidence based research encapsulates a plethora of approaches. The aim of the methods section is to articulate what you intend to do in your research, and justify that course of action. You need to describe, as appropriate to your question and method, the materials, samples, techniques, measures, and procedures employed in the collection of data. These should be in sufficient detail so that an accurate and complete understanding of your methods is provided. One test of this is that another person would be able to conduct the research, based upon your description. Your supervisor will advise you on the amount of detail you will require.

For some parts of the research, you may not have made a final decision as to the specific techniques, etc. In these cases, you should provide an indication for the criteria upon which you will make those decisions. For example, you may have an option of various pieces of software to run a computer based simulation. You should outline the decision making criteria for how you will decide what software to use as best you can.
Many PhDs are multi-study designs. In such cases, the first study should be described in some detail. Subsequent studies should be described to the extent that they can be. In programmatic research, the design of subsequent studies often depends greatly on the results of previous studies. If this is the case, then a statement to this effect should be made. It should be apparent that the scope of the project will meet that of a PhD, so some indication how many subsequent studies will be conducted, and a brief indication of their possible content should be included.

The methods section will include a clear statement of methods including the following, if appropriate to your research:

1. Data Sources.

Data sources to be used should be described in sufficient detail so that their appropriateness to answer the research questions is clear. This will often require a statement that argues why particular data sources are appropriate.

For the use of existing data sources (for example, existing databases), the following features would usually be provided:

I. the name(s) of the data source. For example, Australian Bureau of Statistics name and catalogue number for the specific dataset;
II. the date(s) to which the data refer;
III. the major characteristics of relevance to the research of that data source;
IV. a statement concerning accessibility to the data source, including issues of cost.

If the existing data is to be sampled, the sampling design and related issues should be addressed as below

If data sources are be sampled, including sampling from already compiled datasets, the following features of the sampling process would usually be provided:

The source(s) from which the sample will be drawn, including a statement concerning their appropriateness to answer the RQs in terms of the major characteristics of the data sources of relevance to the RQs. If the sample is from an existing dataset, then the features outlined above should also be included.

The size of the sample to be drawn, plus a rationale for the size. It should be clear that the size of the sample will allow the RQs to be answered. For qualitative studies the sample size may not be known a priori, but an initial sample size will usually be specified and criteria for deciding to cease data collection also specified. It may be useful to provide an expected overall sample size, recognizing this would be only provisional. For longitudinal designs, or designs that require collecting data from the same data sources multiple times, dropout rates should be estimated. Final sample sizes need to be demonstrably large enough for answering RQs.

For longitudinal designs, the time frame for sample should be specified.

The sampling strategy to be employed, including a rationale for that strategy. The strategy will ideally provide a brief discussion of the population and sampling frame where possible, and the process through which the sample will be drawn or developed (e.g., simple random sampling, two stage clustered sampling, snowball sampling, purposive or theoretical sampling, convenience sampling, etc). For qualitative studies which use purposive or theoretical sampling, the basis of this should be clearly articulated. For example, it is better to state the specific theoretical bases of sampling decisions to be used than to make general statement that ‘purposive sampling will be employed’. To achieve this, describe what
type(s) of variation is being captured by the sampling decisions (e.g., organization members working in low, medium and high level positions, including both men and women), as well as what other sources of variation are being controlled (only members from the core work force sampled to control for job security, as well as from organizations sampled from the same industry to control for industry effects). For quantitative studies, stratifications or clusters used in the development of the sample should be stated, and their relevance to the RQs stated or obvious.

For document analyses, the same sampling issues often apply.

Issues concerning access to the data sources should also be commented upon if relevant.

Any limitations concerning the sample regards its composition or size.

2. Measures and/or data to be collected;

There are substantial differences between exploratory qualitative and quantitative approaches in the design of research. Quantitative research usually requires a much more detailed specification of measures compared to exploratory qualitative research.

For quantitative studies:

There should be evidence in the confirmation document of measurement having been considered, even if final choices have not been made. The aim is to demonstrate that appropriate data can be collected. Operationalisation of constructs, including the names and brief description of any existing measures to be used should be provided. Additionally, a brief rationale for the choices made should provided. This might be couched in terms of known measurement properties of the existing measures (e.g., reliability and validity), their use being standard in the field, and their explicit relevance to the RQs. If possible, an appendix containing the full set of measures should be included. If final decisions have not been made, then the specific issues surrounding the choices for measurement for should outlined.

The link between the measures to be used and the constructs they represents should be clear.

For qualitative studies:

This should include the topics of enquiry that will be covered in data collection. It is usual to provide an interview protocol if interview or focus groups are being used. The link between specific questions being asked and the topic that they relate to, and ultimately the connection to the RQs should be made clear. In more exploratory qualitative work, the specific questions may will most likely change as interviews progress. This might be noted. The aim will be to demonstrate that the enquiry will allow appropriate content with sufficient depth of information to answer the RQs.
3. **Procedures** to be used for data collection.

A description of how the data are to be collected is required. This description occurs at two levels: at a broad methods level (e.g., use of a written survey; in-depth interviews; an experiment, a simulation), plus usually a level of detail about how the specific method will be applied in your research (e.g., use of an online, mail, or telephone data collection process for a survey, with brief detail about how that process will be enacted; the experimental manipulations to be used in the experimental design). Often this is quite brief, as the process to be used is relatively straightforward. The aim of describing the procedure for data collection is to allow an evaluation of the rigour with which data is collected.

The rationale for chosen procedures is also necessary to the extent that other options are viable. It is not useful to critique methods that are clearly inappropriate to your research (e.g., if exploratory in-depth qualitative interviews are appropriate to the research, then critiquing experimental design is of no value).

4. A discussion of the overall rigour of the methods chosen, including a discussion of potential problems, and ethical clearance issues.

It is important to make a statement about how standards of rigour appropriate to your epistemological position are met. For quantitative research, this will usually entail issues of validity, reliability and generalisability. For qualitative research, standards are not as uniformly accepted. It is important to state the epistemological position, the standards of rigour that are appropriate, and how they are met in your research. This does not require a complete discussion and critique of a wide range of epistemological positions, but a relatively succinct defense of the match between your epistemology, the standards of rigour it suggests, the methods you will employ, and how they meet the standards of rigour.

5. **Timetable**;

Expected length of time for each phase of the research process.

The adequacy of the methods section will be judged on:

1. The appropriateness of the methods for answering the research question. The methods must link explicitly to the research question. The methods must also be suited to the nature of the question. For example, a thoroughly researched field, in which only a new variable (albeit, a highly relevant variable) is being examined, would rarely be suited to exploratory, theory building methods. Conversely, complex new areas usually would not be suited to general quantitative approaches.

2. The quality of the approach. For all approaches, the issues relevant to validity, reliability and generalisability should be addressed as well as they can for the research area. Rigour is applicable to all research, although the criteria used to judge rigour varies depending upon the approach. The standards of rigour applicable to your proposed research should be articulated and your study evaluated against these.

3. The detail of presentation. Is there enough detail for the reader to replicate the study. For example, this sentence is inadequate: “Additional data will be used for triangulation.” Rather, this sentence would be adequate: “HR exit interviews, turnover data and CEO
memos will be coded.” Similarly, “A survey will be conducted” would not be adequate. Rather, specific items and scales, along with a sample selection strategy should be presented.

Analysis.

The analysis section needs to link the analysis of the research to the data collection methods (approximately 1-2 pages). Ideally it will be precise enough so that the reader knows how the data will be analysed. At the time of confirmation, many doctoral candidates do not have a clear understanding of how their data will be analysed. The description of analytical methods is therefore often brief. It is important that the supervisory team, if not the candidate, is cognizant, prior to collection, of how data will be analysed to ensure the data can be analysed in such a way that it will answer the RQs. This is particularly so for quantitative data. For qualitative research, justification needs to be provided for methods such as coding and dealing with divergent data. For quantitative research, justification of the choice of statistics and the expected results that they will provide should be described.

The adequacy of the analysis section will be judged on:

1. The appropriateness of the analysis approach for the data that is to be collected. It is important that the student demonstrates that they have thought through the relationship between the RQs, the methods and the analysis.

2. The quality of the analysis. The student should demonstrate why this is the best approach to analysis.

3. The detail of the presentation. There must be enough detail for the reader to replicate the analysis. For example, “NVivo or SPSS would be used” is not adequate. Rather, the approach to coding, including how categories would be derived and validated, how the data would be structured, and specific analytical techniques applied, should be included.

Discussion.

This is the concluding section of the report and should include information on implications and limitations of the research, any anticipated threats to the validity of the results, and a summary (approximately 1 – 2 pages).

The adequacy of the discussion section will be judged on:

- Demonstrating a clear understanding of the limitations of the study.
- Presentation of a complete, but not overstated, set of implications for theory and practice.

Time-line for completion of research program.

- Outline the full-course of study.
- Outline details of the coursework completed and the grades achieved.
2. **Seminar Presentation.**

The presentation is usually open to the Faculty, as well as the panel. The presentation should cover the main points of the document, providing sufficient detail so that the audience can understand the program of research. The focus should be balanced between reviewing the literature and the proposed research. The candidate will need to demonstrate that they have good understanding of the relevant theories and literature in their chosen area, and are able to defend the chosen research methods.

3. **Review Panel.**

The panel will meet in private to discuss the proposed research. Panels consist of the principal supervisor, Head of School, or course coordinator, or their nominee, and a Faculty research committee representative. Often there will be four persons on the panel (and occasionally more) with the associate supervisor present and/or a Chair who is not one of the other persons.

Within the panel, the supervisor can often clear up any misunderstandings other panel members may have about the proposed research.

The aim of the Confirmation of Candidature process is to evaluate the capacity of the candidate to complete a PhD, and to assess whether the proposed research program is suitable for a PhD. There are two main areas of evaluation: the soundness of the theoretical propositions, or content of the proposed thesis; and the soundness of the methods to be used within the research. Both of these areas need to be of an adequate standard for confirmation as a PhD candidate to be granted. It is not necessary for every panel member to be equally proficient in both areas, but the best panels will be those that have both content and methods strength within the panel. Unless there are significant objective improvements that can be made to the proposal, panel members should not impose their own research agenda upon the proposal. It is important for panel members to evaluate what it is the candidate is proposing.

The Faculty panel makes a recommendation to the University Research Degrees Committee, which is the ultimate decision maker.

Most often candidates are confirmed. Nevertheless, some changes to the document may still be requested. Within the context of being confirmed, these changes would normally be relatively minor, and be expected to be completed with some alacrity.

Candidates can be terminated at the point of confirmation. This is a severe outcome, and would usually have been foreshadowed by a previous unsuccessful attempt at confirmation, or known issues.

Some candidates are placed under review for a specified period of time. This occurs when their confirmation has been unsatisfactory, but the panel forms the opinion that the student is likely to reach the required standard with more time and with specific direction. If placing a candidate under review, the panel should be very clear about what is inadequate in the existing proposal and what the candidate needs to achieve by the end of the review period. This should be clearly communicated in writing. The length of the review period needs to be judged in terms of the work that is required. At the end of the review period, several possibilities remain: the student can be asked to submit a revised document; and they can be asked to present another seminar. A further seminar is not always requested.
For some candidates, it is recommended that they transfer to a research master’s program. This would be the case if the candidate has conducted sufficient work for a research master’s program and it appears the standard of the work is more appropriate to a master’s program rather than a PhD.