**HELPFUL GUIDELINES TO CONDUCT THE HDR CONFIRMATION OF CANDIDATURE PROCESS**

**by Simon Moss**

|  |
| --- |
| **Introduction** |

The confirmation of candidature usually comprises a research proposal and an oral presentation. The CDU policies, procedures, and forms offer some insights into the role of colleges, supervisors, and candidates during the confirmation of candidature process. Nevertheless, even when these procedures are followed, some problems will occasionally unfold. Although uncommon, some of these problems are severe. The following table illustrates some of these concerns.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Concern | Details or examples |
| Harsh questions and evaluations from the panel or audience | * If candidates receive a critical question or a derogatory comment during their oral presentation, they may experience profound distress   For several reasons, many academics underestimate the likelihood and gravity of this distress, because they do not appreciate that   * the incidence of mental health problems tends to escalate during the candidature; thus, many candidates may be experiencing, but not manifesting, mental health problems * when individuals feel they could fail a task—and this failure could impinge on their sense of identity—their usual resilience tends to dissipate * candidates often recognize their candidature could be terminated and, hence, their identity as a research candidate could be shattered * although candidates should eventually learn to field challenging questions, they cannot readily develop this quality before they experience the security of confirmation |
| Misinformed concerns from the panel or audience | * Audience members often express unfounded concerns about projects, because they are not familiar with the relevant epistemology, paradigm, or methodology * For example, audience members who are not familiar with positivism, post-positivism, constructivism, pragmaticism, critical theory, or postmodernism sometimes challenge the assumptions of candidates who have adopted one of these perspectives |
| Conflicts of interest | * The panel members who evaluate the confirmation of candidature may sometimes judge candidates too harshly—or not critically enough—because of conflicts of interests. * They might, for example, report to the principal supervisor and thus want to please this person |

These concerns are not trivial and, in some instances, have culminated in severe consequences. For example

* HDR candidates have reported suicidal ideation and suicidal attempts soon after confirmation of candidature
* HDR candidates have developed a phobia of public speaking in the aftermath of these presentations
* HDR candidates have withdrawn soon after the candidature, incorrectly believing their work was flawed

**Overview of this document**

This document presents a series of guidelines to help colleges, supervisors, and candidates organize confirmation of candidature as effectively as possible. If you would like to suggest improvements to these guidelines, please contact [simon.moss@cdu.edu.au](mailto:simon.moss@cdu.edu.au). These guidelines clarify the role of

* principal supervisors
* the confirmation of candidature panel
* the chair of this panel
* the Colleges—including Menzies School of Health

**Please the read the section that is relevant to you.**

|  |
| --- |
| **Procedure that principal supervisors should follow** |

In practice, the principal supervisor tends to arrange most of the procedures. The following table outlines the procedures the supervisors should typically follow, coupled with justifications and details. In some instances, the principal supervisor might delegate these responsibilities to one of the other supervisors, provided this person is sufficiently experienced.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Responsibilities of the Principal Supervisor | Justification or detail |
| Help candidates write the research proposal | * Encourage the candidate to read the document on how to write research proposals, available in Learnline, in the section on Confirmation of Candidature, Progress, and Competitions. * PhD research proposals tend to comprise 7000 to 10000 words; Masters research proposals tend to comprise 5000 to 7000 words * However, whenever preferred, shorter or longer research proposals are acceptable * Encourage the candidate to read HDR-16 to be aware of the criteria that will be applied to evaluate their proposal and presentation   **Appraise the contents of the research proposal**  To ascertain whether the research proposal is adequate, determine whether this proposal   * describes a problem in society or a controversy in the literature this research is designed to address * clarifies which unique feature or blend of features of this study could be applied to solve this problem or controversy * reviews the key theories, arguments, and findings * presents clear aims and research questions * if the research is qualitative or mixed, justifies the theoretical perspective and methodology * specifies the participants or specimens, materials, sites, procedures, and methods or techniques to collect and to analyze data * presents a timeline of activities and addresses relevant ethical, safety, or legal matters * outlines a feasible budget; typically, candidates receive $900 a semester if the project is low cost or $1800 a semester is the project is high cost—unless they can secure other sources. They could also specify other resources and support   **Appraise the writing style of this research proposal**  The research proposal does not need to be written perfectly but should demonstrate the candidate can write grammatically and professionally   * Is the writing generally grammatical? If not, refer candidates to the “Overview”, in the section called “How to write more effectively” in Learnline * Do most paragraphs include a simple, topic sentence that outlines the key argument? Do paragraphs comprise 2 to 8 sentences that revolve around this topic sentence? If not, refer candidates to “Constructing paragraphs”, in the section called “How to write more effectively” in Learnline * Is the writing reasonably concise, precise, and professional. If not, refer candidates to other documents in the section called “How to write more effectively” in Learnline   **Variations**  Research proposals will vary across disciplines and paradigms. For example   * if candidates want to conduct grounded theory or similar methodologies, the proposal might include only a short literature review—enough to justify the original purpose of this study * If the research comprises a sequence of studies, candidates will often describe only the first study in depth; candidates might then present some possible designs or plans of the subsequent studies. |
| Determine the panel | **Mandatory features**   * The panel must comprise three individuals—or, in exceptional circumstances, four or five individuals * All members need to have attained qualifications or experience that is equivalent to the degree program * Often, one member of the panel will be a supervisor; no more than one member can be a supervisor   **Desirable features**   * Especially for qualitative research, all members of the panel should be familiar with the paradigm, such as positivism, constructivism, pragmatism, critical theory, or postmodernism to preclude unnecessary clashes of theoretical perspectives * Members of the panel should not feel restricted in their capacity to challenge the project; for example, members of the panel should not be direct reports of the supervisors or experience other conflicts of interest   **Procedure**   * When forming the panel, the principal supervisor should seek the insights of both the candidate and the other supervisors * Contact the proposed panel members to gauge their availability |
| Seek approval of the panel | * The College Dean or a Delegate—usually the Assistant Dean of Research or HDR coordinator—will eventually be invited to sign the confirmation of candidature application form: HDR-16 * Usually, the supervisor should email the proposed confirmation of candidature panel to this person as earlier as possible—and then respond to queries or suggestions from this person |
| With the candidate, decide who will attend the oral presentation | * The confirmation of candidate panel must attend the oral presentation * But, the candidate should then decide whether other individuals should be invited. * You may encourage the candidate to invite other individuals, primarily to seek more feedback and support   Some academics believe that candidates should learn how to defend their research in settings that could be very challenging. However, and consistent with the biophysical model of challenge and threat, to promote resilience, candidates should expose themselves to challenging settings only after their candidature is confirmed—once they feel more secure and empowered. |
| Organize a time and location of the oral presentation; designate a chair | * Arrange the oral presentation to be convened a week or two after the research proposals are emailed to the panel * Principal supervisors often book a location themselves or ask the College administrators to organize this location * Candidates who want to invite a larger audience should submit an abstract of their presentation and a short bio * Designate a chair of this panel   **Duration of presentations**   * The principal supervisor and candidate can negotiate the duration of these presentations. * A typical PhD presentation might last 30 to 45 minutes plus an additional 10 to 15 minutes dedicated to questions * A typical Masters presentation might last 15 to 45 minutes plus an additional 10 to 15 minutes dedicated to questions |
| Send the research proposal to the confirmation of candidature panel |  |
| Help candidates prepare the oral presentation | * Encourage the candidate to read the document on how to present effectively, available in Learnline, in the section on Confirmation of Candidature, Progress, and Competitions * Encourage the candidate to practice their presentation with their supervisors |
| Invite the audience | * If the audience is limited and, for example, primarily comprises the confirmation of candidature panel, the principal supervisor might invite the audience * If the candidate would like a larger audience, ask the college administrators to invite the entire college, institute, or other individuals |
| After the oral presentation, deliver feedback to the candidate | * Discuss how the feedback from the audience and panel could be utilized to improve the research * If necessary, offer comfort to the candidate; some candidates, even if they excelled, may doubt their work after the presentation * This discussion should be as soon as possible, such as within an hour, after the presentation |

|  |
| --- |
| **Procedure that confirmation of candidature panel should follow** |

The confirmation of candidature panel obviously evaluates the research proposal and oral presentation. Yet, how these panels fulfil this role varies appreciably. The following table outlines some recommended guidelines.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Responsibilities | Justification or detail |
| Read most, but not necessarily all, the research proposal before the oral presentation | Some members of the confirmation of candidature panel may feel too busy to read the entire research proposal in depth. Nevertheless, these members should at least   * read the aims or purpose of this research proposal carefully * skim or read enough of the literature review to understand the aims and to evaluate the writing capability of the candidate * read and evaluate the methods * read information about the timeline, ethical matters, and budget to evaluate the feasibility of this project |
| After watching the oral presentation, ask supportive questions or express helpful suggestions | In general, ask questions, or suggest comments, to   * clarify and refine the aims * clarify and optimize the methods of data collection and analysis * inspire the candidate to read about other theories, perspectives, methodologies, or techniques   However, during this event, when asking questions or suggesting comments, you should never   * evaluate the candidate or project adversely—such as “I’m concerned about this study” * express statements merely to seem intelligent   If you are concerned about the candidate or project, express these concerns to a supervisor privately |
| With the other members of this confirmation of candidature panel, decide on the outcome | That is, soon after the presentation, convene to decide whether you would like to   * approve the candidate * approve the candidate, but with the proviso that particular changes will be introduced * ask the candidate to repeat part or all of the confirmation of candidate again, called reassessment * inform the research office you believe the candidate should withdraw, called rejection. This option is available only after the candidate has presented their research two or more times.   To approve a candidate, the research proposal and oral presentation does not have to be perfect. Approve candidates if you feel   * **the supervision panel is appropriate**; that is, the supervisors can offer the requisite feedback on the discipline, the paradigm, the methodology, and the methods * the candidate has **developed the capabilities** that are essential to the project but hard to acquire within the candidature—such as basic English grammar * the candidate has been able to **devote enough time** to this project, as demonstrated by extensive knowledge or effort * the project is potentially **feasible within the timeline, budget, and ethical constraints—**or could be modified readily to become feasible * the **scope of this project** is appropriate. A PhD should be roughly equivalent to 3 or 4 ordinary papers; a Masters by Research should be roughly equivalent to 1 or 2 ordinary papers |
| Offer the candidate feedback on how to improve the research | You might, for example   * seek clarifications on the aim, methodology, and methods * suggest amendments to the aim, methodology, and methods * refer to other theories, books, articles, or training programs that could be helpful * recommend the scope of this project be confined or extended   Record this feedback on the relevant form: HDR-16 |

Besides these activities, the confirmation of candidature panel should refrain from specific actions. For example, the panel should not

* discuss the project with the candidate after receiving the research proposal, but before the oral presentation. Candidates should feel secure during this period

|  |
| --- |
| **Procedure the chair of this confirmation of candidature should follow** |

One member of this confirmation of candidature panel—and not the supervisor—should be designated as the chair. The role of this chair is the same as the role of other members of this panel besides some additional responsibilities, as the following table outlines.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Responsibilities | Justification or detail |
| Organize the evaluation form— HDR-16—before the oral presentation | * If you feel the list of criteria in Section 1 are not applicable to this project, you can modify or omit some criteria. |
| Introduce the candidate immediately before the oral presentation | * Determine whether the supervisor would prefer to introduce the candidate instead   **Contents of this introduction**   * You could welcome the candidate or present a brief bio * You could remind the audience of their role—to encourage and to assist the candidate rather than demonstrate their intelligence * You could request that questions should usually be deferred to the end, unless the candidate prefers otherwise |
| Immediately after the presentation, prompt questions or comments from the audience | * Again determine whether the supervisor would prefer to prompt questions and suggestions * Typically, first ask the panel members whether they would like to ask questions and express suggestions * Remind the audience of their role: to clarify or refine the aim and methods—or to suggest other theories, perspectives, methodologies, or techniques to consider * If questions or comments could be perceived as derogatory, intervene with interjections like “Remember the project will evolve over time” * At the end, thank the candidate |
| Either immediately after the oral presentation—or as soon as possible—chair the discussion between the panel members | * All members should be granted an equal opportunity to express their perspectives * Centre the discussion on the main criteria to evaluate the project as well as possible refinements to the aims and methods |
| Complete the evaluation form: HDR-16 | * Other members of the panel may contribute to this form * If the panel would like the candidate to be reassessed, you do not need to complete this form yet |
| Organize the signatures and send this form to the college | * The principal supervisor might prefer to complete this task instead * If the panel would like the candidate to be reassessed, you do not need to seek this signature yet |
| If applicable, and together with the principal supervisor, organize a reassessment | If the panel would like the candidate to be reassessed, members need to transcribe, as precisely as possible, the matters they would like the candidate to address. The supervisor could deliver this information to the candidates in person as well. The chair should then invite the candidate to pursue one of these three alternatives within about 6 weeks   * Perhaps invite the candidate to address the feedback in a written document—such as two to three pages. The panel, if satisfied with this response, can then proceed as if the confirmation of candidature had been approved * You could invite the candidate to present again—but confine the presentation to changes that were designed to address the feedback. Only the panel would be invited to attend. Again, the panel, if satisfied with this response, can then proceed as if the confirmation of candidature had been approved * In exceptional circumstances, when the project needs to be revamped almost completely, the entire procedure could be repeated   In each circumstance, however, the evaluation form HDR-16 should be emailed to the College only after this reassessment. |

|  |
| --- |
| **Procedure the College or Menzies should follow** |

To complete the confirmation of candidature effectively, representatives of the Colleges, including Menzies, must also fulfil their responsibilities. The following table outlines these responsibilities.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Responsibilities | Justification or detail |
| Monitor deadlines | * If possible, the College should ascertain whether the candidates have submitted their research proposals on time * PhD candidates should submit their research proposal within 6 months; Masters by Research candidates should submit their research proposal within 4 months * Candidates could be invited to justify delays and submit a plan to clarify when and how they will complete this proposal as soon as possible |
| Approve the confirmation of candidature panel | * The principal supervisor will typically inform the college of who they have assigned to this panel * A delegate of the College Dean—often the Assistant Dean of Research or the HDR coordinator—must approve the panel   **Criteria to approve the panel**   * The panel must comprise three individuals—or, in exceptional circumstances, four or five individuals * All members need to have attained qualifications or experience that is equivalent to the degree program * Usually, one member of the panel will be a supervisor; no more than one member can be a supervisor * All members of the panel should be familiar with the paradigm, such as positivism, constructivism, pragmatism, critical theory, or postmodernism to preclude unnecessary clashes of theoretical perspectives * Members of the panel should not feel restricted in their capacity to challenge the project; for example, members of the panel should not be direct reports of the supervisors or experience other conflicts of interest |
| If requested, organize the location and invite the desired audience | * The principal supervisors might either complete these tasks themselves or ask the College—often the relevant HDR administrator—to complete these tasks |
| Sign and send the HDR 16 form to ORI | * A delegate of the Head—often the Assistant Dean of Research or the HDR coordinator—must sign the HDR-16- College Assessment of Research Proposal and Oral Defence * The College, often the HDR administrator, should email this form to the relevant address, typically [Research.Degrees@cdu.edu.au](mailto:Research.Degrees@cdu.edu.au) |