

HDR Resilience: Self-Awareness in the PhD Confirmation of Candidature

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Abstract

The Higher Degree by Research (HDR) journey can be exhilarating and perplexing for postgraduate students. In postgraduate research there are many milestones that students must pass to ensure that they are deemed capable of completing a quality PhD and contributing to knowledge in their discipline on a specific topic. In the Higher education sector in Australia, the Confirmation of Candidature (CoC) is the first milestone that HDR students need to pass. As scholars we are aware of the vast amount of literature that evaluates how postgraduate students navigate the uncertain pathway to the PhD.

The aim of this paper is to reflect on the CoC experience and impact of navigating the milestone in the HDR journey in an Australian context. In addition, it is hoped that by sharing this experience the author will help students navigate the overt and hidden requirements embedded in university education. A carefully prepared presentation may still require amendments from an academic panel to strengthen project design. If students do not pass this milestone, the author wishes to offer suggestions for how to understand what is required and move forward to achieve a strong project and pass this milestone.

What is the Confirmation (CoC) process? Why is CoC important in the PhD or MPhil candidature journey? How does one prepare for the CoC presentation? What will you gain from the CoC process? The paper will use an educational practice model such as Gibbs' 1988 reflection model, educational theories and research literature relating to HDR students' experiences, to support the author's reflective observations and assist future students.

1. Introduction

When preparing for the Confirmation of Candidature (CoC) in your PhD by research, there are many skills you need to learn quickly. This paper introduces the preliminary steps that new PhD students need to navigate in the early part of their candidature through the author's transformational learning experience. Reflections on the author's experience show how she was challenged, responded to the feedback and completed the Confirmation process. Sections describing how literature supported her approach using a strong theoretical framework will be included to assist research students and their

supervisors develop their own pathway to successfully complete this milestone.

2. Background

The author traversed an unusual pathway in her career to commence study in an online PhD as a mature aged student in 2023, initially as a part-time student. She had several careers such as: working in Australia as a public servant, retraining as a secondary school teacher and becoming a tenured academic. While working as a teacher, she acquired postgraduate qualifications and transitioned into the Higher education sector in Australia, initially on contract as a lecturer for five years and then in a tenured lecturing role for fifteen years full-time [1], [2].

In 2024 this working academic became a full-time student due to extraordinary circumstances created in part by the COVID-19 pandemic and the savage cutbacks affecting universities globally. Leaving her full-time academic job was not an easy decision, but she was presented with an opportunity to improve her career prospects and engage with academics as a student, while continuing to extend her scholarship [1].

The author continued to be a member of professional associations such as HERDSA (Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australia) where she currently holds a leadership role. Through community engagement she works in the scholarship of teaching through mentoring new and experienced academics profile their experience for different purposes such as preparing presentations, writing abstracts or consolidating their academic experience into a meaningful narrative for fellowships [1].

The purpose of tracking and reflecting on the HDR journey was for self-discovery learning, helping HDR students and improving understanding of hidden aspects of learning in the PhD. The caution she offers is that everyone's PhD journey is different, so she recommends that readers review this article to assess if there are aspects of the process that will help you move forward in your PhD. If you are a doctoral supervisor, please recommend strategies that could be useful to your students.

Navigating academia backwards by having a successful career then reverting to being a full-time

research student was always going to be a challenge but not in the way the author thought. To clarify terms with multiple meanings the author will offer working definitions to support understanding of this reflection on learning.

In the context of this reflection on the process of Confirmation in the PhD study, resilience is the ability to progress one's study despite exposure to a challenging environment [1]. Gibb's 1988 model of reflection will be used to make sense of the experience that the author encountered, learn and use this knowledge to pass the Confirmation [2], [3].

Educational self-awareness in relation to the PhD is complex as it encompasses reflection on a broad spectrum of feelings, emotions and cognitive processes that occur while you are learning or teaching others. Accomplishing goals, completion of tasks and decision making are part of recent research that focuses on using strengths to increase resilience [4]. When you are learning on the PhD journey, self-awareness occurs when you actively identify, process and store information about the self.

It is expected that the following questions will be answered in this paper:

- What is the CoC milestone?
- Why is the CoC important in the PhD candidature journey?
- How does one prepare for the CoC presentation?
- What will you gain from the CoC process?

3. Literature

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of PhD students is often reported in research according to groupings of a particular type of student cohort [4]. While there is literature reporting motivational factors of mature aged students when engaging in HDR studies, it is suggested that this research needs to be expanded to engage in a deeper understanding of the diverse challenges they experience when struggling with aspects of the PhD journey [5]. There appears to be limited research on how mature-aged, working academics who leave academia and return to being full-time research students, successfully navigate the steps towards completion of their doctorate [1].

Skakni's review of PhD students' motives and motivations through the theoretical lens of Giddens (1984 and 2005) for engaging in postgraduate research, acknowledges that social structures can enable as well as constrain individuals' agency [6]. In addition, Skakni highlights findings in the Group of Eight 2013 report that the average age of PhD students is on the rise in Western countries.

Insight, reflection, contemplation and taking the time to be mindful, is referred to as dispositional self-awareness [7], [1]. Becoming more self-aware

through reflective practice, during every stage of the PhD is essential if one hopes to succeed, particularly for mature aged students [1].

4. Theoretical Approach

Transformative learning can be observed during the student's progression through the Confirmation (CoC) journey through writing the CoC proposal, incorporating feedback from PhD supervisors and careful review of the assessment criteria. For transformation to occur the author suggests reading and reviewing relevant literature on the confirmation process as well as in one's chosen topic [1]. Seeking support for navigating this journey is also recommended as one should not neglect one's emotional responses to feedback and mental health needs as these aspects of learning also lead to transformation [8].

During the Confirmation process, a student could transform how they engage in regular reading and writing, self-help, particularly in relation to engagement in training programs, finding and completing academic administration forms and maintaining a strong collaborative relationship with the supervision team [9].

Sometimes transformative learning can be uncomfortable if the student does not understand how to apply feedback or fails to see why they need to make specific changes if they have significant research experience. If the student has experienced earlier academic success, been employed and then reverts to being a student, fear of the unknown aspects of the PhD can pose challenges such as associated with the *Imposter Syndrome* meaning that you may believe you are not as competent as others perceive you to be [10].

Using the transformational model proposed by Mezirow (1991) assumptions and interpretations of learning experienced by students change over time. In the first phase of Mezirow's model, disorientation, students may experience feeling overwhelmed or confused at the commencement of their PhD [11]. However, through interaction with their supervision team and involvement of others, including peers, who support their learning, over time the student transforms from being dependant to a more self-directed learner [12], [1].

5. The Confirmation Process

The Confirmation of Candidature process is a formal assessment milestone to ensure that the higher degree by research (HDR) students have made a solid start to their candidature and demonstrated that they are ready to progress to the next phase of their research [13]. In the Confirmation (CoC) process a student must prepare an extended proposal which is typically structured as follows:

The PhD candidate (student) prepares an extended research proposal under the guidance of their PhD supervisors, which is developed in the first 6-12 months of candidature for presentation to an academic panel [14].

The academic assessment panel consists of the PhD supervisors, the HDR co-ordinator (the Chair), and senior academics, drawn from different schools from the university, in addition to at least two additional academics who work in the candidate's discipline school.

The purpose of this panel is to provide advice and feedback on the HDR candidate's completion of relevant induction, research training, engagement with scholarship, extended proposal and presentation. In addition, the panel ensures that the candidate is familiar with and has a process in place for completing ethics as well as adherence to University policies and procedures [13], [14].

Supervisors work with the students by providing feedback and guidance on written work, to ensure that they have a final ready 15 working days prior to the academic panel meeting [13].

The PhD student prepares a Power point presentation to accompany their presentation to the panel. It is recommended that the students practice their presentation with their supervisors and make recommended adjustments [14]. If the PhD is offered fully online, the presentation is conducted via conferencing technology such as Zoom instead of a face-to-face forum. The author of this paper is currently enrolled in a full-time PhD offered fully online.

6. PhD Reflection

To effectively respond to feedback, it is recommended that the PhD student reflects regularly on their experience and progression through the research degree. What is reflection and why engage in this approach to enable transformation in your learning? Learning through everyday experiences involves examining a situation and working out what influenced events, the outcome and identification of strategies you could adopt to resolve the situation if it happened again [15]. In the context of this paper, if the author had to undertake a Confirmation in another research degree there would be some aspects of the process she might approach differently. Examples may be first trying to identify hidden curriculum requirements and including additional components in an extended proposal.

Self-reflection is a process that academics are asked to engage in for promotion, performance review and in the context of this higher degree research, students' learning journeys. It involves asking yourself questions about tasks, including how you felt about a situation and what aspects of your practice

such as thinking, cognition and action you changed [15].

There is considerable value in reflection during the PhD or indeed any form of academic pursuit or teaching [1]. Kolb's cycle of learning provides useful scaffolding to support reflection on the Confirmation, journey starting with a concrete experience which is reflected on. Adjustment through experimentation and research informs the development of a more robust research design and project [16].

Reflection is important to transform your learning, acquisition and application of knowledge to solve dilemmas. By engaging deeply in the process, you have the capacity to pause and make sense of a situation or experience with a view to changing one's approach [16]. An example would be if a presentation was well received by the audience, but you felt that you had inadvertently omitted important aspects of your scholarship.

Engagement in deep reflection allows you to express feelings and emotions that should be processed so that they do not hold you back or impede fulfilment of your goal. It sounds good in theory, but the author needed to persevere in a different way than most younger students, as her responsibilities were greater as a mature aged student. These responsibilities and experiences such as caregiving, employment or community work, impact on how we give and receive feedback [8].

Pursuing a PhD is a privilege and an honour. However, one must remain humble and open to feedback as this increases your chance of success.

As a mature aged student who has had an academic career there is a realisation that this could be the pinnacle of your academic achievement alongside your body of research [8]. It is hoped that by reflecting more deeply, one takes the time to recognise assumptions and apply new learning to improve knowledge as well as adjust problem solving and teaching issues.

7. Reflection on Experience to Navigate Confirmation using Gibbs' (1988) Model

Using a reflective framework to make sense of a student's responses to challenges enabled transformative learning to occur. The author accepts that there are other reflective practice models which may be more relevant to guiding one's situational experience [3]. However, in this paper Gibbs' (1988) model is used to guide the author's reflection on her experiences in the disciplines of Information technology, Higher education, and Educational Psychology, summarised in the following steps [3].

In each step, concrete examples from the author's experience have been included to show how the reflective framework can be used or adapted to guide

and support transition through the Confirmation process and the transformation of learning [1].

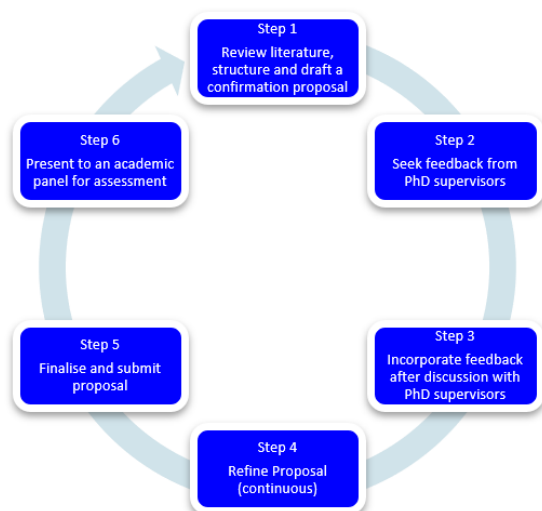


Figure 1. Reflective Practice Approach for the Confirmation Steps Framework using Gibbs' 1988 Reflective Cycle [Fisher, 2024]

A suggested reflective approach to the Confirmation process (CoC) will be explained using the above adapted Gibbs' 1988 framework as a guide. This model was first developed in Fisher's 2023 PhD reflection paper to make sense of what the process is designed to do; how to navigate it and come through the other side acquiring knowledge and a stronger research design, which will lead to passing the Confirmation [1].

The preparation stage of the Confirmation process was challenging but worthwhile.

Step 1: Describing the experience

The CoC process commenced with the development of a proposal that was reviewed by her PhD supervisors at intervals to elicit feedback and guidance. The supervisors provided feedback that informed diverse methods of thinking, prompting her to follow up and review literature on various parts of the proposal. She worked diligently to provide quality work knowing that she would receive timely, honest, and guiding feedback. Working with them in this way-built confidence. The supervisors suggested that she undertake a practice Confirmation run through before presenting to the panel.

The following extract from her reflective journal communicates the experience of the Confirmation.

'I undertook my CoC on 13 March 2024 via Zoom with the UNE CoC committee who were assessing my PhD proposal. The anticipation made me feel somewhat anxious, but the actual event was okay. I had prepared a twenty-minute presentation on my

proposed PhD project. It required considerable preparation such as research, organisation, and many drafts. I delivered the presentation confidently and at a comfortable pace. Reviewing the presentation with my supervisors prior to the formal assessment really helped me navigate the process. Preparation for this type of scholarship was something I was used to doing when I worked as an academic.'

Step 2: Processing thoughts and feelings

During the presentation she generally felt at ease. However, by the end of the assessment she had mixed feelings about her performance.

'As a mature aged student, the experience was reasonably comfortable. My supervisors, the HDR chair and most of the panel members were supportive and made me feel comfortable. However, as different members of the panel fired additional questions at me in the final part of the assessment, where the student is alone with the panel (minus observers), that seemed to fit more into a detailed proposal (not what was required in the CoC). I did feel a bit unnerved and a bit confused. Now, at the time and as I reflected several weeks after the event, I felt that some members were testing me so that I could improve my research proposal and strengthen my philosophical approach (which is part of what academics must expect to defend). But at the same time, if I had been a younger, less experienced student and not an academic in my previous employment, I may have felt crushed, caved in and not proceeded.'

The author passed the Confirmation and was commended for a professional presentation by the panel and responses to questions. However, there was a requirement to make some key amendments such as: include a philosophical statement clearly articulating her worldview, consider a mixed methods of research strategy or case study using a qualitative approach and adjusting the frequency of interviewing participant volunteers (academics) given they may be discouraged from volunteering as participants.

'I was grateful for the advice as when I look back, I acknowledge that these changes strengthened my PhD project. I expected that I might have to make changes but did not expect that it would take approximately three months. This concerned me as it would significantly delay my completion of this milestone and the timeline for completion I had agreed with my PhD supervisors. In addition, it was unclear when the updated proposal would be given the final review so I could complete this part of my candidature.'

There were options offered to her to suspend studies or go part-time if she needed additional time

to complete amendments or wanted to vary her candidature. She did not want to do this as she had invested in full-time study. She was pleased she passed but upset and annoyed after the experience due to the substantial impact on her work schedule. She had been grilled longer than necessary in the second part of the presentation, which lasted for well over an hour. It did occur to her that the panel may have found her topic, namely *how academics derive resilience from using technology to complete educative work* interesting, and that is why the second session went on for so long.

However, upon reflection when she had time to recover and put the questions and feedback into perspective, she realised that the Confirmation (the disorienting dilemma) had transformed her thinking and intended actions, should she ever have to undertake a Confirmation process again.

Step 3: Evaluation

'My evaluation of the experience is mostly positive, particularly in relation to guidance from my supervisors. However, a complete rethink of some parts of the proposal is not the outcome I had hoped to achieve. I will be set back at least three months. What it has highlighted is that the Master and Apprentice model of supervision in the context of confirmation needs to change. Having completed a previous HDR degree, I had many challenges in it and instead of it being a very positive journey it was strewn with obstacles and being beholden to people making time in an 'ad hoc way' rather than the more positive experience I am having in the PhD where I feel supported by the supervision team.'

Step 4: Analysis

After I had recovered from being under pressure to defend my proposal, I began to analyse my experience.

'Things (my performance at the assessment) went well, although not according to what I expected, because I prepared thoroughly for the Confirmation of Candidature Milestone presentation. I had prepared additional slides pre-empting the type of questions I thought the panel may ask about my choice of methodology and research approach. This type of preparation was based on my experience as a teaching and research academic and from engaging with literature and books pertaining to how students should prepare to defend their proposals. My supervisors also offered guidance which I followed because of discussions on the topic.'

Towards the end of the questioning, without observers, I was feeling quite anxious, given my perception at the time was that I was being asked to include additional 'hidden' parts of the curriculum

that had not been specified such as my worldview, which is social constructivism, I thought it was communicated clearly in my presentation when I emphasised my interest in how academics constructed strategies to foster resilience when using technology to undertake educative work. I realised that if I had to make some adjustments such as include my philosophical (worldview), use case studies, reduce the number of interviews of academics to one or two as they may be less inclined to engage in the research if it is time consuming, it would take time. It was suggested I not treat the study as a phenomenological inquiry but rather a case study approach, using thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke, 2006. This was very helpful advice.'

Step 5: Conclusion

The Confirmation Process is challenging for students. It is designed to be helpful to them and for the most part it is. However, it was difficult to determine how complete it. The author felt that she stumbled when she encountered 'hidden' aspects of the curriculum, which were unexpected due to her thorough preparation and academic staff experience.

'Although I came through this experience and completed the final process, for at least a month I was unable to find the answers I needed to address some of the written amendments and felt like I had hit a wall. It was easier to make more complex changes than some of the simple ones.'

Step 6: Action Plan

The action plan was developed in consultation with my supervisors. First, she developed a schedule showing the suggested changes made by the panel, changes she was going to make and the reference page with a comments section.

The second action item was to amend the proposal and seeking feedback from her supervisors on the final changes before sending it back to the panel for approval and completion of the process.

Time was a concern for her as the initial schedule of work for completion of my PhD was impacted. However, during this time she worked on other aspects of the thesis and completed some international journal articles for blind peer review.

Submission of the revised proposal was timely (within the three-month window). However, due to university administration issues it was several months before it was finalised (beyond the control of the academic assessment panel).

8. University Administration

By university administration the author is referring to teams that manage the policies, rules and regulations of a tertiary institution. Timetables for

completion of milestones, academic assessment panels as well as ethics advisory committees are mapped out for the (HDR) research students. With regards to the Confirmation process, this milestone is mapped out in consultation with the research supervisors and the student [13], [14].

Despite these well organised timetables and competent administration staff, delays in actioning HDR students' administration requirements are inevitable due to the many layers of approval of documentation, such as Confirmation amendments, which must be completed. In the author's case, if a key staff member in one of the administration areas was unavailable then paperwork was delayed. The frustration to the HDR student is that their 'time' for completion does not get extended due to delays that were related to university backlogs. The completion 'clock' keeps ticking away and a month can end up being several months before decisions are made and communicated to the students and supervisors. Even though the university will suggest putting your PhD on hold or going part-time this may not suit everyone if they have limited financial resources or family responsibilities. There is a risk that the student may not come back to their studies.

The author has observed that delays of this nature are common in other universities she has studied and worked in as an academic staff member. This section was included to help students appreciate that the academic assessment team, supervisors and university administrators work hard to ensure timely approval. The caution for students here is to be aware of possible delays and do not let the delays impact upon your study. Keep working on other aspects of your thesis such as tidying up references, extending your literature review and maintain regular contact with your supervision team.

9. Supervision Team

Your HDR supervisors will help you navigate the Confirmation process. It is important for students to build strong, positive relationships with them. By the time students are preparing for their Confirmation they would have been working closely with their supervisors to navigate this key milestone in their PhD journey for at least six months [1].

The author got to know her supervisors who worked closely with her to ensure that a good rapport had been built up through open communication and mutual respect. Regular meetings were scheduled, and additional meetings were negotiated ahead of deadlines when a task was taking longer than expected to be completed. It is suggested that students be honest about the work they have been able to finalise, ask questions regularly for clarification and do not hesitate to tell them that you are having difficulty and produce suggestions for discussion [1].

As a research student the onus is on you to note

questions arising from your research and have goals in mind when participating in PhD supervision meetings.

10. Hidden Aspects of Your PhD Experience

The following section is based on the author's experience and observations of the impact of hidden aspects of research study on one's ability to shake the Imposter Syndrome [10]. Curriculum designed for schools or tertiary institutions will have overt and covert aspects that students are expected to navigate.

As scholars we are aware that universities are institutions that prepare students for professions and different occupations, therefore the rules and regulations designed to protect the organisation, staff and students need to be rigorous so that standards are adhered to, and students can perform tasks competently in their careers.

The known curriculum rules are usually posted on a university's website and are framed as a policy with guidelines outlining milestones in a student's candidature, procedures to follow and outcomes related to passing, amending or failing. In the PhD in Australia each university sets the first milestone of the Confirmation of candidature.

Hidden aspects of the curriculum can be a challenging concept to grasp and explain [17]. Values, norms and beliefs together with skills or understandings that are expected of an HDR student but not necessarily specified, can impact both younger and older students' experience, in diverse ways. A supportive PhD supervision team is essential to guide the student's journey while refining their research proposal and hopefully uncovering some of these perplexing 'hidden' aspects of learning [17]. However, students need to engage in self-awareness and reflective practice to research what additional support they need [4]. If you feel that there are hidden aspects of learning that need to be explained, first seek advice from your supervisors or if you are mature aged and working, trusted colleagues.

Assumptions in academia, such as the capability of students or staff at different age cohorts do exist [17]. The author encountered them when she was working as a senior academic in a faculty and later in academic development areas where at one point, she was the youngest member of the team and there was an assumption she did not possess enough experience when she had worked for corporate development as well as the Federal government [18]. If we acknowledge our assumptions as students or academics, we can use them to strengthen our approach to research design and guidance of peers and students.

Unfamiliar concepts, language and terms can confuse students so note down unfamiliar issues for further review [19]. There are plenty of short videos

about research design which are available if one prefers an overview before reading up on these things.

The author has experienced a positive journey with the university while engaged in HDR studies and notes the impressive resources and support available to research students in the 21st century [13]. Engagement with HDR peers and faculty staff in professional and informal conversations have helped inform and guide the Confirmation process [19]. For students beginning their search for resources, it is recommended that one does not limit themselves to a particular resource. Finding short videos which explain key aspects of your thesis such as conceptual frameworks, literature reviews and support with methodology is a solid starting point. Once you have resolved the issue, branch out your search for journal articles, books and other online resources.

11. Conclusion

Confirmation is the first major milestone in the PhD journey in Australia. The author suggests that students prepare a strong proposal and work closely with their supervisors who will provide guidance on reading, writing and additional scholarship or training required. Ask many questions to help you develop a strong proposal.

Working diligently and regularly on the proposal will result in many benefits such as improving your scholarship, writing and opportunities for contributing to research.

Manage deadlines and plan for the unexpected. If things do not 'go to plan,' consider what you will do to fix the issue and find something to work on while you wait for approvals.

Adhere to the administrative requirements of your research degree to ensure accountability so timely assistance can be sought. Be aware of the hidden aspects of the curriculum. Hidden aspects are not put in to confuse the student but may be assumptions in the policies or guidelines that were not anticipated by students.

Keep reading, reviewing and thinking. Note down your reflections in a journal. It will help you make sense of your experiences and the journey towards successful completion of this milestone.

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