

# PhD and MPhil Confirmation in Mathematics and Physics: a guide for students

Confirmation is a process in which a student must demonstrate their knowledge of their research topic, outline progress so far and present detailed plans for the remainder of their candidature. It offers the student an opportunity to develop their planning, writing, speaking and listening skills and develop their working relationships with the advisory team. It gives the student an opportunity to present their work in both oral and written forms to a general discipline audience, and receive feedback on their preparedness, progress and research plans. In addition, it provides a forum for any needs or problems to be raised or identified, and resolutions sought. This process should help prepare the student and their advisors for a successful candidature, including paper submissions, talks and the thesis submission.

The main requirements of the confirmation process are

- The submission of a confirmation report
- The presentation of a seminar
- Attendance at an interview with a staff confirmation Committee

For general information, please consult the Grad-School website:

<http://www.uq.edu.au/grad-school/confirmation-candidature>

and read the confirmation section of the relevant SMP Milestones document, available at:

<http://smp.uq.edu.au/content/research-higher-degree-program-milestones>

## Procedure

Preparing for your confirmation will take some time, so start the confirmation process at least one to two months before your confirmation is due. You may need to revise your confirmation document and confirmation will only be achieved after the Committee is satisfied with all aspects, so you should consider giving your confirmation seminar in the month before it is due. Undergoing the confirmation process on time will improve your chances of completing your degree on time.

- Discuss with your advisors the status of your project to determine whether confirmation is now appropriate or whether provisional candidature should be extended for e.g. 3 months. Please discuss any concerns arising from this with your RHD Coordinator.
- Find out which date(s) your advisors are available for the seminar/interview and advise the Mathematics or Physics RHD Coordinator, at least one month before the planned confirmation. The available dates are listed on the SMP Intranet – you can see these by logging into [www.smp.uq.edu.au](http://www.smp.uq.edu.au) and clicking on Student Related Resources. Confirmation talks are usually held Thursdays at noon in room 6/424 for Physics and Friday at noon in room 67/442 for Mathematics. The RHD Coordinator will advise you who will be on your confirmation Committee.
- Prepare a report according to the guidelines below (use the template provided); discuss drafts with your advisors. Send your report to the Mathematics or Physics RHD

Coordinator for a brief check at least 10 days before your seminar. Once approved, email the final version to all members of the Committee at least a week before your seminar. Late reports will result in the seminar/interview being postponed and may mean that you will have to apply for extension of candidature.

- Prepare a seminar of 20 minutes duration. We recommend that you practice this in front of your advisors / other group members. Keep in mind that your confirmation Committee is likely to include people from a variety of fields, so prepare a talk that is understandable for non-experts.
- Send a title and abstract for your confirmation seminar to the RHD Coordinator for checking at least a week before your seminar. Your seminar will then be advertised via the maths-all or physics-all mailing lists the week before with a follow-up reminder on the day.
- Set up your presentation so that you are ready to start at 12:00 precisely. You should email the slides of your talk to your Committee Chair after your confirmation interview.

After the confirmation interview is over, the Chair of the Committee will give you written feedback from the Committee, along with its recommendation, which is usually one of the following:

- a) The candidate has fulfilled all the requirements and can be confirmed immediately, possibly with suggestions to be implemented before mid-candidature review.
- b) The candidate is asked to make some revisions to their report. The candidate will be confirmed once the revisions have been completed to the satisfaction of the Chair of the Committee.
- c) Where substantial concerns have been expressed, the Committee may specify tasks that need to be completed during a time of extended provisional candidature. Confirmation would follow once these tasks have been completed to the satisfaction of the Committee and advisors.

## **Report**

Your report must conform to the rules given in SMP Milestone's document. We strongly recommend that you give the details as outlined in the template provided. This structure will help you to think about and articulate the 'big picture' associated with your project and to prepare for the questions often asked by the Committee. It will also be useful training for the kind of writing needed in grant applications and 'broad interest' journal articles. It is expected that the report will be written in a commensurate style with high-quality exposition. The Committee should be assured that your project is worthwhile and feasible within the time-frame of your PhD or MPhil.

The page limit for your report is 10 pages (A4 with 12 point font, single line spacing and standard margins). You must discuss drafts of your report with your advisors. Please distribute your report at least a week before the interview to each member of the Committee (via email, unless a Committee member requests a paper copy as well), as well as to your advisors. The reference list should include authors, full title & publication name, year, volume and page range. The references can be as small as 10 point font if desired.

Good examples of past confirmation reports can be obtained from your respective Postgraduate Coordinator. The procedures in this document were adopted by Mathematics

and Physics in early 2015, although they are similar to the procedures used previously in Physics.

## **Seminar**

The seminar must be presented publicly, and should be of no more than 20 minutes duration, with a further 5 minutes for questions. Time limits will be strictly enforced.

As in the report, you should aim to convey the significance and scope of your project to a broad audience, giving a summary of progress to date and plans for completion. A good presentation will make the subsequent interview go more smoothly.

## **Interview**

The interview normally takes place immediately after the seminar. It is essential that the candidate's advisors be present, as well as four Committee members. The interview will normally be chaired by the Mathematics or Physics RHD Coordinator, who is also one of the Committee members. It will be conducted in three stages. With the student and advisors present, the Committee will ask questions to clarify the research project and overall directions, such as:

What are the “big questions” in your field, and how might your project shed light on these?

What are the particular scientific objectives of your project?

What plan do you have for achieving these? How do you know when you have succeeded?

How does your work relate to what others are doing in the field? Who are your competitors?

What written work have you produced? What has been your contribution to any published papers?

Then there will be an opportunity for you, without your advisors present, to raise any concerns about the relationship with your advisors and the support you are given. This is your main formal opportunity to raise such concerns and seek to have them addressed. The Committee may ask you about:

- Do your advisors provide you with appropriate guidance with respect to literature in your research area?
- Do you feel comfortable raising issues with your advisors that concern you?
- Have you and your advisors worked out the degree to which they will be involved in the research?
- Are your advisors available for discussions/consultations when needed? Do you have regular scheduled meetings with your advisors?
- Do your advisors engage you in constructive discussions about your progress?
- Do your advisors read your work in a timely manner and give you useful feedback?
- Have your advisors/Postgraduate Coordinator given you an adequate introduction to the procedures, laboratories and personnel in your discipline?

Finally the Committee will have a short discussion with just your advisors. If the Committee feels that any aspects of the confirmation document require revision, they will communicate these to you via subsequent emails, meetings and/or annotated drafts. These should be attended to as soon as possible, checked by your advisors, and then sent back to the Committee (along with any drafts).

Although many students find the confirmation process somewhat stressful, most agree afterwards that it is a very useful exercise that accelerates their progress towards successful completion of the degree.

*Updated 23/6/2015*