PHD Confirmation in Physics: a guide for students

The main requirements of the confirmation process are
- the submission of a report and plan,
- the presentation of a seminar,
- attendance at an interview with the panel of staff that recommends confirmation.

The panel members are:
- Dr Joel Corney (Physics RHD coordinator) <corney@physics.uq.edu.au>
- A/Prof. Michael Bromley <brom@physics.uq.edu.au>
- Dr Holger Baumgardt <baumgardt@uq.edu.au>
- A/Prof. Ben Powell <powell@physics.uq.edu.au>
- Prof. Ross McKenzie <mckenzie@physics.uq.edu.au>
- Dr Taras Plakhotnik <taras@physics.uq.edu.au>
- Prof. Halina Rubinsztein-Dunlop <halina@physics.uq.edu.au>
- Dr Karén Keruntsyan <kerunts@physics.uq.edu.au>
- Prof. Timothy Ralph <ralph@physics.uq.edu.au>
- Dr Timo Nieminen <timo@physics.uq.edu.au>

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 Physics PhD Milestones document:
http://smp.uq.edu.au/content/research-higher-degree-program-milestones

Procedure

- discuss with your advisor the status of your project to determine whether confirmation is now appropriate or whether provisional candidature should be extended for eg 3 months. Please discuss any concerns arising from this with the RHD coordinator.
- find out which date(s) your advisers are available for the seminar/interview and advise the RHD coordinator, at least one month before the planned confirmation. The available dates are listed on the SMP Intranet. Confirmation talks are usually held Thursdays at Noon in Rm 424.
- prepare a report according to guidelines below (use the template provided); discuss drafts with your advisor and email the final version to all members of the committee 7 days 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 15 mins duration. We recommend that you practise this in front of your advisors / other group members.
- advertise your confirmation seminar (with title and abstract) via physics_all (eg the week before with a follow-up reminder on the day)
- set up your presentation in the interaction room so that you are ready to start at 12:00 precisely
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 advisors.

Report

Your report must conform to the rules given in SMP Physics 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. The committee should be assured that your project is worthwhile and feasible within the time-frame of a PhD.

Remember the page limit is 10 pages (with 12 point font). You must discuss drafts of your report with your advisor(s). Please distribute your report (via email, unless a committee member requests a paper copy as well) at least a week before the interview to each of the panel members listed above, as well as to your advisors.

Seminar

The seminar must be presented publicly, and should be of no more than 15 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 a four panel members. The interview 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. The committee may ask you about:

- Does your advisor provide you with appropriate guidance with respect to literature in your research area?
- Do you feel comfortable raising issues with your advisor that concern you?
- Have you and your advisor worked out the degree to which he/she will be involved in the research?
- Is your advisor available for discussions/consultations when needed? Do you have regular scheduled meetings with your advisors?
- Does your advisor engage you in constructive discussions about your progress?
- Does your advisor read your work in a timely manner and give you useful feedback?
- Has your advisor/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.

Although most students find the confirmation process stressful at the time, most agree afterwards that it is a very useful exercise that accelerates their progress towards successful completion of the degree. So, rather than thinking of the process as a problem, consider it an opportunity to assess your situation, to have your needs considered and to obtain help where it is needed.

*Updated 21/03/2012*