The Confirmation Process
School of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering (SCCE)

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What is the purpose of confirmation?

A doctoral researcher's skills and their project should evolve considerably over the first year of study. It is, therefore, appropriate to assess progress at this point and provide formal feedback to ensure the project is on track for timely submission. As such, the confirmation process is a formal assessment of the feasibility of on-time completion of the doctorate based on progress within this first year. It is a peer-review process in which academics outside of the supervisory team read a report written by the doctoral researcher about their progress thus far and their plans for future research and then examine the candidate *viva voce*. Through this process, the doctoral researcher receives independent feedback, identifying strengths and weaknesses both about their own skill level and their research project. Both the confirmation report and viva are essential components of this assessment and the doctoral candidate must perform satisfactorily in both elements to continue with their doctorate.

Apart from the assessment aspect, you should view the confirmation process as a valuable opportunity to get independent external feedback on both the project aims and your performance to date. It is a time to take stock of where you are in your research and consider how you are going to complete your research degree on time. The confirmation process also provides a check that the supervisory arrangements and facilities for the work are appropriate for the efficient completion of the project.

What are the learning objectives (LO) of the Confirmation?

1) Demonstrate evidence of critical engagement with academic literature;
2) Construct reasoned arguments for study and approach;
3) Develop a clear case for the novelty and academic/professional value of proposed research;
4) Demonstrate the feasibility of methodological approach, methods proposed and/or experimental technique(s);
5) Create realistic plan of work, which can be completed within funded period or agreed upon completion date (not to be longer than 48 months for full time or 96 months part time);
6) Evidence that research and transferable skills (including writing and analytical skills) are developing at a rate necessary to complete and defend a doctorate within specified completion time period;
7) Provide evidence for availability of necessary resources to complete project;

Fulfilment of these learning objectives must be demonstrated in the written confirmation report and confirmation viva.

These learning objectives underpin the following assessment matrix that examiners complete after the oral examination to help inform their judgement of the work:

Overall project	Major concerns	Minor concerns	Satisfactory	Good	Excellent
Suitability of research aims and objectives	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Suitability of proposed methodology	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Investment in personal development	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Motivation and enthusiasm for the project	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Report and viva	Major concerns	Minor concerns	Satisfactory	Good	Excellent
Knowledge of subject	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Review of literature	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Quality of writing	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ability to discuss, defend and critically analyse work orally	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Standard of data collection (if applicable)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Progress	Major concerns	Minor concerns	Satisfactory	Good	Excellent
Progress to date	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Suitability of research plan	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Likelihood of on-time submission	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Publication

There is no formal requirement for a doctoral candidate to publish academic work to graduate with a doctorate from the University of Surrey; however, this is an important activity for newer researchers to engage in. Therefore, it is recommended that planning for academic publication forms part of the plan of work, clarifying when outputs are expected, as well as conventions regarding authorship.

What are the technical requirements of the confirmation report?

The confirmation report is used to assess all the above learning objectives, in written form. The quality of the academic writing as well as the content is of key importance as both are essential to ascertain the likelihood of timely completion of a doctorate. Guidelines for the report structure are provided below with department-specific information, recognising that doctoral researchers may deviate from these templates depending on their project. If you are working on an interdisciplinary project situated between two departments, please discuss with your supervisor what guidance you should follow and ensure your examiners are aware of this decision.

Confirmation report (Sciences)

Please note this is just a typical example and there will be a great deal of variation as each project is unique.

Structure

- Introduction (which includes the literature review; LO 1, 2, 3, 6)
- Aims
- Methods/Methodology (including your justification for methodology and methods; LO 2, 3, 4, 6)
- Preliminary data (LO 4, 5, 6, 7)
- Discussion (including conclusions; LO 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7)
- Future plans (LO 5, 6, 7)
- References (LO 1, 3, 6)

Style

The report should be written in a legible font/size, such as Calibri 11 or Arial 10. It should be on standard A4 paper with 1.5 line spacing.

Length

Reports should be on average 35 pages (between 25–45 pp; <u>maximum of 50 pages inclusive of references</u>), with a typical breakdown of: Introduction (10 p); Methodology/Experimental (5 p); Results (10 p); Discussion (5 p); Future Work (3 p); References (2 p). Please note this is just a typical example and there will be a great deal of variation as each project is unique.

Future Work

This is an important section of the report in which you demonstrate that you have a plan or future work, including contingency plans if higher-risk components do not work as planned an idea of how long tasks may take. A Gantt chart is a useful way to present such plans but there is no formal requirement for its inclusion.

References

Only references cited within the report should appear in the reference list at the end of the report. You should not try to reference everything you have read, but instead reference the works that best help you develop the argument for your research project.

References should typically be formatted in IEEE or RSC style, using in-text numbers with references listed numerically in the bibliography, i.e. in the order in which they appear within the text. If your discipline typically uses a different referencing style, this is acceptable as long as there is style consistency throughout the report (ask your supervisor for direction and advise your examiners of the decision).

Submitting your report

Deadline

The Doctoral College no longer sends out individual letters with deadlines but allows department/school/centre-specific regulations. Within the School of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering, the confirmation report is due on the first Monday after 12 months' of full-time study (24 months' part time) (plus any time you were on temporary withdrawal within this period). If you started your PhD with full-time attendance in October 20xx, your report is due on the first Monday of October 20(xx+1).

The confirmation process **must be concluded** within 15 months' FT study (typically end of December for October-starters) or 30 months' PT. This is a University deadline with very little flexibility. Please make sure you submit your report by the above deadline to ensure your examiners have enough time to read the report, do the viva, and complete the paperwork to avoid unsatisfactory academic progress procedures.

Submission

Your supervisor will have nominated two academics with relevant expertise to act as your confirmation examiners. It is your responsibility to provide your examiners with the finalized thesis. Usually, electronic copies are fine, but your examiners might ask you to provide hard copies.

In addition, for recording purposes, you will need to **submit an electronic version** of your Confirmation Report (Word or PDF format) via the SurreyLearn PGR module "FEPS Postgraduate Research". Click on "Assignment Submission" (see image below) and follow the instructions. Confirmation Reports will be checked by Turnitin (a plagiarism checker) and the score will be recorded and monitored by the FEPS Academic Integrity Officer (AIO).
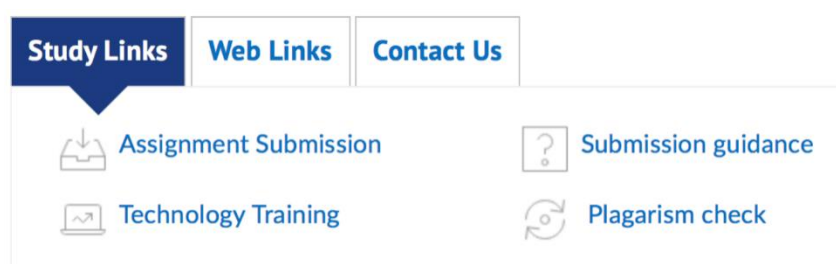
What is the purpose of the confirmation viva?

The confirmation viva assesses all of the above learning objectives, specifically focusing on the researcher's ability to explain, defend and critique. Examiners will determine specific questions based on their reading of the confirmation report, to confirm knowledge, seek clarification and assess the specific learning objectives. Questions will range from being very specific and focused on the details of your project and why you have made certain decisions, to big picture asking about how your research will fit into the larger context of your field. Furthermore, they may ask you more hypothetical questions particularly around contingency plans if aspects of the work does not go to plan.

The structure of the confirmation viva

CPE: At the beginning of the confirmation viva, it is expected that the doctoral candidate gives a 15–20 min presentation to the examiners first. After the presentation, the doctoral researcher will be questioned by two examiners.

Chemistry: The two examiners may ask you to give a short summary of your work, but a formal presentation is usually not expected.

If you work on an interdisciplinary project, please ask your supervisors (and examiners) to clarify what they expect.

It is expected that at least one of the members of the supervisory team will be present, however, they will take no part in the questioning or be allowed to answer questions, except those that would clarify a point of order. The session will consist of the examiners asking questions and you answering. You will have access to your confirmation report and any notes or papers you wish to bring into the exam with you, i.e. it is an open-note examination. The length of the confirmation

exam varies greatly across disciplines and across individuals. In general, it will last as long as it needs to. Therefore, you should be prepared for it lasting at least two hours, however, this may not be the case. You can bring a drink, a snack, or any other necessary comfort into the examination with you. You also can ask to have a comfort break if needed.

Vivas should usually be held face-to-face but can, if necessary, be done virtually. In either case, the supervisor is responsible for arranging the meeting and chairing it.

In online meetings, you are able to share your screen to show things to the examiners. Examiners may also ask you to write something on paper and hold it into the camera (e.g., chemical mechanisms etc). If you are worried or nervous about a remote viva, perhaps you can arrange for a "dry run" with friends or your supervisor to familiarise yourself with the software and make sure your video and audio work well. If the viva takes long, feel free to ask for breaks as you would in a face-to-face session.

How best to prepare for the confirmation viva

Top tips

1. **Learning to talk about your research**: Vivas are about taking about your research. Therefore, take every opportunity possible to talk to people in formal (departmental seminars, Faculty Festivals of Research, the Doctoral College Conference) and informal (with researcher colleagues over coffee, friends over lunch, interest groups at meetings, neighbours over the fence) settings. The more varied your audiences the better able you will be to articulate your ideas in a range of ways and the more confident you will become. Public engagement activities are very useful in this respect.
2. **Practice answering questions**: think of the most awful, difficult question that anyone could ask you and formulate in advance the main points that you would include in your response (facing your worse fears diminishes them!); you can practice with friends, your supervisor or with a member of the RDP team (email rdp@surrey.ac.uk)
3. **Learn how to help yourself deal with stressful situations**: You could prepare by learning some relaxation techniques in advance. Everyone is different in how they best learn to cope. The Centre for Wellbeing offer courses and advice that may be useful for you.
4. **The night before**: If it helps your confidence, have one last skim through the thesis but do not stay up long and late to do this. Getting some sleep is much more important. You may find taking some physical exercise in the fresh air helps with your nerves. Tempting though it may be, try not to resort to sleeping medicines or alcohol because these frequently lead to a fuzzy morning head!
5. **On the day:** Dress smartly, but comfortably to boost your confidence. Bring with you: a copy of your confirmation report, a pen and notebook, a prepared list of typographical errors that you found after submission, personal necessities e.g. tissues, bottle of water. A little light exercise, perhaps just a nice walk prior to the exam may help. Before you go into the room, try some 'power posing', in a quiet place. For about five minutes or so, make yourself as big as possible, standing up straight and tall, and stretching out your arms. Be positive, walk in proudly this is your opportunity to talk about your research and gain helpful feedback to make your doctorate the best it can be. **<u>Covid update</u>**: If it helps your confidence, arrange the webcam so it shows you in a natural way. It is best to appear to be looking into the camera rather than be filmed from the side.

Answering Questions

The ability to answer questions about your doctoral research plan, your own development as a researcher, and the academic and/or professional context in which your research fits is a key skill you will need for your confirmation viva. Key tips for answering questions include

1) You can ask for clarification if you do not understand a question.
2) You have as much time as you need to think prior to answering. Use your confirmation report to help you ("you can see this in the figure on page 12, where…"). It is useful to be familiar with your report so you don't need too long to find a specific section.
3) Defend your work and your plan, however, do remain prepared to learn and open to suggestions and input from the examiners.
4) It is common for examiners to make suggestions at this stage of your doctorate. Value this feedback and discuss it fully with your supervisor after the viva. Your supervisor will usually be present during the viva and might also be able to take notes to facilitate this.
5) Always remember the goal of this process is to make sure you and your project are in a good position to complete your doctorate within your specified time frame. You, your examiners and your supervisors are all working towards this goal.

What are the potential outcomes?

At the end of the viva, the examiners will ask you to withdraw and will discuss your report and performance in the viva before agreeing the outcome of the exam.

The examiners record their recommended outcome on the examiners' report form. Normally, the examiners will then tell you verbally their recommendation and the main points of their feedback, however, the outcome is only formalised once it has been approved by your departmental or centre Postgraduate Research Director, and by your Faculty Associate Dean (Doctoral College). You will then be notified of the final result by the Research Degrees Office.

The potential outcomes of the *first attempt* at confirmation are as follows:

1) Student is **CONFIRMED** on PhD/MD/EngD registration.

   If examiners choose this option they should still provide feedback to the doctoral researcher with feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the project as well as their personal development as a researcher. The examiners may require some minor amendments to the report. Doctoral candidates should reflect on the feedback given and, discuss potential adjustments to the project and their future professional development plans with their supervisor.

2) Student is **NOT CONFIRMED** on PhD/MD/EngD registration but is permitted to resubmit the confirmation report **without** a further oral examination.

3) Student is **NOT CONFIRMED** on PhD/MD/EngD registration but is permitted to resubmit the confirmation report **with** a further oral examination.

   If examiners choose these options, they must provide the doctoral candidate with specific guidance on what needs to be completed in order to meet the required standard to pass confirmation. The confirmation report should be resubmitted within a specified period of time (usually not longer than 3 months, or 6 months if part-time).

After the *second attempt* at the confirmation the potential outcomes are:

1) Student is **CONFIRMED** on PhD/MD/EngD registration (this might include some minor amendments to the report).

   The examiners consider that the standard required for doctoral confirmation have been met at the second attempt. Doctoral candidates should reflect on any additional feedback given and discuss potential adjustments to the project with their supervisor.

2) Student is **allowed to submit for MPhil only.**
   The standard required for confirmation on a PhD or MD degree has not been met, but the examiners consider that the student could submit a reduced dissertation for the degree of MPhil. The programme transfer is processed by the University, and the student submits their research according to the regulations for the MPhil programme. This would usually include further research and the writing of a further report later.

3) Student has their registration **terminated.**

   The examiners have concluded that the required standard has not been met and the option to continue on with an MPhil is not deemed appropriate.

What support is available?

Training

All doctoral researchers should attend the required '**Confirmation Process'** workshop delivered by the Researcher Development programme. Part-time and distance researchers who are unable to attend sessions on campus should email rdp@surrey.ac.uk to make specific arrangements. This workshop will help doctoral researchers to better understand the overall learning objectives of the confirmation process and how these can be demonstrated in the report and in the viva. However, it is important to understand the individual nature of each submission, and a key part of this process is for the doctoral researcher to begin to demonstrate ownership or their project and their own independent critical thought. There is also a '**Writing Your Confirmation Report'** workshop to help researchers with the academic writing style required of the report.

Researcher Development Programme details
email: rdp@surrey.ac.uk
Website (workshop schedule): https://www.surrey.ac.uk/researcher-development-programme/workshops/postgraduate-researchers
Workshop Registration: https://studentselfserve.surrey.ac.uk

Administrative support

Research Degrees office
Website: https://www.surrey.ac.uk/doctoral-college/about/research-degrees-office (Go to website to find specific departmental contact email).

Doctoral College
website: https://www.surrey.ac.uk/doctoral-college
email: doctoralcollege@surrey.ac.uk

Other Support

Additional learning support (for dyslexic, disabled and neurodiverse PGRs)
Website: https://www.surrey.ac.uk/currentstudents/study/als/
email: als@surrey.ac.uk

Centre of Wellbeing
Website: https://www.surrey.ac.uk/currentstudents/wellbeing/Wellbeing/
email: centreforwellbeing@surrey.ac.uk