College of Education, Psychology & Social Work Guidelines for Confirmation of Candidature milestone

1. Introduction

The purpose of this document is to outline the processes involved in completing the Confirmation of Candidature milestone in the College of Education, Psychology & Social Work. These processes allow students to demonstrate they have the necessary knowledge, skills and resources to proceed with doctoral level research.

Each milestone review requires an evaluation of progress, an assessment of the student's written work, and an assessment of the student's oral communication. For each milestone, the student and supervisor must complete the necessary forms through the university's Inspire app (https://inspire.flinders.edu.au/). Completion of the *Confirmation of Candidature* milestone requires that HDR students successfully present—in both written and oral form—a full research proposal for evaluation. The development of a research proposal is a critical step towards producing a thesis, in line with the College's aspiration to develop high quality research activities among its staff and students. Regardless of discipline, the College's Confirmation of Candidature milestone process will provide:

- A forum in which a proposal committee can assess HDR students' research plan;
- An opportunity for HDR students to receive critical feedback on their research plans in a supportive environment;
- An opportunity for HDR students to enact an important part of academic practice, i.e., the communication of knowledge through public presentation.

For HDR students who are enrolled full-time, this milestone should occur within 6-12 months from the date of first enrolment. For part-time students, this milestone should occur within 12-24 months of enrolment.

HDR students and their supervisors should read the information about milestones on the Office of Graduate Research website; the College's process is guided by their guidelines (http://www.flinders.edu.au/graduate-research/progressing-through-your-rhd/rhd-milestones.cfm).

Students and supervisors should also make themselves familiar with the relevant university policy and procedures set out in the Research Higher Degree Student Information Manual (http://www.flinders.edu.au/fms/Office%20of%20Graduate%20Research/documents/FU%20RHD%20Student%20Manual%202015-WEB.pdf) and the Student Related Policies and Procedures Manual (http://www.flinders.edu.au/graduate-research/progressing-through-your-rhd/guidelines-and-policies.cfm).The Office of Graduate Research also offers additional Research and Employability Skills Training (REST), including a Confirmation of Candidature workshop, which can be accessed by students online (https://www.flinders.edu.au/graduate-research/rest/).

2. Preparing and Submitting the Research Proposal

HDR Candidates in the College of Education, Psychology and Social Work will undertake doctorates using many different research approaches. Some of the those approaches might include:

- experimental design,
- surveys or questionnaires,
- ethnographic (including auto-ethnographic),
- different forms of interviews,
- discourse analysis, or
- historical and archival research.

At the Confirmation of Candidature stage, HDR students are expected to demonstrate a level of competence in the following broad criteria as appropriate for the discipline or field of enquiry:

- Conceptual or theoretical knowledge of field of study.
- Ability to evaluate literature critically.
- Ability to design appropriate methods of investigation.
- Ability to develop and present coherent arguments.
- Ability to focus on a research topic.
- Ability to explicate a clear and coherent research question.

Developing the proposal

During the first year of enrolment, HDR students' efforts should be focused on planning their research project and developing their full research proposal, in consultation with their supervisors. If required, supervisors should call on staff with relevant methodological expertise and content knowledge in the field of research. If the student experiences any difficulties when preparing their full research proposal, they should discuss these issues with their primary supervisor in the first instance. Supervisors could provide the student with a good example of a proposal that has been developed for a project in a similar area, or from a previous student (with those other students' explicit permission). Supervisors and students may wish to undertake a mock presentation in preparation for the formal proposal presentation.

A research proposal is a well-considered plan for undertaking research. Its purpose is to demonstrate to a panel that the student has acquired sufficient knowledge in their research area to pose a novel and theoretically-motivated question, that the student has a good grounding in the research methods that they will need to use, that they can communicate these methods effectively, and that they are prepared to conduct the research ethically and with integrity. Therefore, the proposal document and presentation must provide enough detail for the proposal committee to make a judgement about the soundness of the research plan.

The proposal presentation should be a critical but constructive and supportive meeting. It is an opportunity to gain feedback and insights—from an informed audience—that will be helpful in the development of the project. The proposal does not have to be a blueprint for the entire thesis; rather it is the solid foundation on which the thesis will be built. Indeed, it is anticipated that the research will evolve and change somewhat over the course of the research project.

The proposal should:

- provide a working title for the thesis;
- provide a brief outline of the project;
- establish why the planned research is original and significant (for example, its importance for advancing knowledge in the field, discipline or region and/or implications for methodology or understanding);
- clearly state the research problem;
- specify the aims and research questions or objectives that have been established for the project;
- establish a conceptual framework for the project and contextualise these concepts within a body of related research, usually through the development of a critical review of this literature and theory;
- establish a clear rationale for the planned research that explains how the research will advance current understanding in the area;
- set out details of the research design and the research procedures to be used;
- articulate the research methodologies and forms of analysis that will be used to address these aims / research questions;
- set out a schedule of resources required to undertake the proposed research (e.g., equipment; field work expenses), after consultation with supervisor(s);
- set out a schedule of sources of funding to support the resource requirements (e.g., existing equipment; HDR College funding), after consultation with supervisor(s);
- explain how the research procedures will allow each of the research objectives and / or research questions to be addressed;
- show that ethical issues associated with the project have been considered. A copy of ethical approval by the relevant committee application should accompany the research proposal. If ethical approval is required but has not been sought, an explanation and plan for application should be included. If the research does not require ethical approval, a statement stating that approval is not required, and why, should be included.

In considering the above elements a panel will assess whether the:

- writing is clear and concise;
- arguments being made are clearly structured;
- review of literature covers the key theoretical positions and the significant previous research related to the project;
- significance of the project is clearly established;
- research aims and research questions are clearly expressed and cover a body of research that is appropriate to meet the originality requirements of the degree;
- research methodologies and procedures are suitable for achieving the research aims;
- research procedures will be used appropriately;
- likely forms of analysis that will be undertaken are appropriate;
- limitations of the project have been made clear;
- ethical considerations are addressed;
- suitable financial and material resources are available, making the project timeline, scope and scale feasible.

Structure of a proposal

The research proposal should be between 4,000 and 6,000 words. Prescribing a word length is based upon the need for researchers to write grant applications and submit publications to a prescribed word length. Presenting a research idea and the related supporting material in a concise and cogent manner is an indication that the student has a sound grasp of their chosen field of research, and that the project itself has the necessary scope and scale to be awarded a doctoral degree.

Research proposals come in many forms, influenced by the researcher's discipline and philosophical stance. The exact form of your proposal should be guided through discussion with your supervision team.

The proposal will be typed in 12-point font and be double-spaced. Reference style recommendation is discipline-specific, but style must be consistent through the document.

The suggested structure is:

- Cover page with title, the student's name, the supervisor's name(s);
- Overview/introduction: reviews the background literature using relevant research and logic to justify the study's topic and hypotheses, describes the proposed studies, and concludes with the statement of specific aims, hypotheses, or predictions. This section may include the establishment of a theoretical or conceptual framework used to review the literature and refine a research question;
  Methodology: include considerable detail for the first proposed study. In the case of a multi-study thesis, or research using grounded theory or critical methods, each study need not always have similar levels of detail, but it should be evident that the student has thought of the specific directions in which the research could progress. Sections may include information on:
    - The philosophy of science and the researcher's standpoint
    - Theoretical framework
    - Methodology
    - Design matters including:
      - Participants (intended participants and method of recruitment)
      - Materials (description of experimental stimuli/apparatus or questionnaires)
      - Procedure.
- Results. Pilot data are helpful, but not essential. Preliminary data may be included here.
- Brief outline (list) of statistical analyses appropriate to test the stated hypotheses.
- References (as needed)

Additional sections that are not included in the word count:

- Ethical considerations including questions of principle and regulation, including:
  - Whether the research requires Human or Animal Ethics approval, whether it has intellectual property implications, and whether other constraints are anticipated.
- Resources and budget (1 page; including materials, equipment, and other resources needed to conduct the research).
- Timeline: The proposal documentation should also include the completion plan that is part of the milestone process. You might also like to include a list of detailed goals for the next 6 months.

- Appendices for other information such as power analyses, instruments, interview questions, measures and materials.
- Turnitin report on the proposal document, that will be later uploaded to Inspire with a copy of the proposal.

Convening the Panel

The proposal panel will comprise the supervision team, two reviewers—selected by the supervisor—with relevant expertise and experience in the area of the project (who may be drawn from inside or outside the College or University). Panel members should receive all documentation in advance.

Once the supervisor(s) have approved the written proposal, the panel reviewers will review it, and reach a decision about whether it is ready to go to a proposal assessment meeting. It is recommended that the review period be no longer than 2 weeks. The panel may request revisions prior to and/or postponement of the meeting, provided that the issues identified for revision are too substantive to address during discussion at the meeting itself and must be made before the proposal can be properly assessed.

Once the reviewers have determined that the written proposal meets the required standard for it to proceed to a formal presentation, the student's supervisor(s) will convene a meeting at a time suitable to the student and panel members. *The proposal document should not be disseminated outside the panel without the prior consent of the student and supervisor(s).*

Note that prior to the proposal assessment meeting, the student will need to start the milestone in Inspire.

3. Proposal Assessment Meeting

Format

Psychology students:

Attendance at proposal assessment meetings will normally be limited to the HDR student, supervision team and reviewers. The meeting will usually take about one hour and may begin with a brief oral summary of the proposal from the student, followed by discussion of the written proposal document. It is recommended that the supervisor (psychology) take notes of any verbal feedback during the meeting and provide that feedback to students as a written summary. Feedback from reviewers may also be provided as tracked changes/comments on an electronic document.

The oral presentation will be delivered within the Mind, Body & Cognition weekly colloquium series, during Semester 2 of students' first year of candidature, or Semester 1 of their second year of candidature (or equivalent FTE for part-time students). All staff and postgraduate students are encouraged to attend; staff and students from other research sections may also be invited to attend. The presentation date will be determined in consultation with the Colloquium convener (Emma Thomas, emma.thomas@flinders.edu.au). The presentation will usually be 12 minutes with 3 minutes for questions.

Education & Social Work students:

The panel will normally be chaired by the HDR Discipline Representative or a senior academic colleague ("HDR delegate"). If the supervisor is also the HDR Discipline Representative another senior staff member will act as chair.

Attendance at proposal assessment meetings is open to all postgraduate students and staff in the College. Organising an individual proposal assessment meeting is the supervisor's responsibility; once the meeting is organised, the supervisor should advertise it, advising staff and students of the details.

The meeting will usually take about one hour and will begin with a 20-minute presentation of the student's proposal. During and after the presentation panel members will ask questions and make comments that the student should respond to. Once the panel's questions have been addressed, the Chair of the meeting may invite questions from the floor. When the panel is satisfied that this process is complete, the student, and any other non-panel members present will leave the venue. The panel will discuss the presentation and make a recommendation on the proposal. It is recommended that the Chair of the meeting take notes of any verbal feedback during the meeting and provide that feedback to students as a written summary. Feedback from reviewers may also be provided as tracked changes/comments on an electronic document.

Note: A student can present the proposal through live videoconference link if it is not possible to do so in person. Also, the presentation element of the proposal assessment meeting may instead be met during an equivalent 'presentation opportunity' that may attract a larger audience—such as during a College seminar series or at the College HDR Conference—provided that the supervisor and proposal reviewers are present. In this case, a separate meeting would be organised, as per guidelines above, to review the written document.

Evaluation Criteria

The written proposal and oral presentation together will be evaluated for the extent to which the student demonstrates:

- sufficient knowledge and understanding of the topic;
- an appropriate theoretical framework which will lead to an original and defensible thesis;
- that the proposed research is original or adds value to existing knowledge and that the research can be placed into an existing body of knowledge and that the student has the necessary skills to do so;
- to summarise, interpret, evaluate, and critique the relevant literature;
- to design and interpret research methods, as appropriate;
- to summarise, interpret, evaluate, and critique research findings or data;
- to communicate research findings in formats appropriate to the discipline;
- to demonstrate critical insights;
- capacities to carry out independent research.

Outcome

There may be issues about the research plan or significance that arise in the proposal presentation meeting that require further consideration. Where problems in the research plan are identified it is expected that members of the panel will provide feedback—including possible directions for solution of the problems—that will help the student to address any problems and develop their research.

If required, the reviewers may request a revised proposal, and/or a second proposal meeting with new presentation before reaching a decision. In this case, another critical analysis of the proposal document by a proposal committee will take place as soon as practicable in order to facilitate the timely completion of the student's research. Should the document continue to provide insufficient detail or fail to address the issues arising from the presentation, the candidate will be counselled by the HDR Discipline Representative or College HDR Coordinator.

Following discussion, the panel will inform the student that either:

- The student's progress is satisfactory and they may commence the project as proposed (subject to minor revisions if necessary); or that
- The student's progress is at risk. Modifications, as specified, are required to bring the proposal document to the necessary standard; or that
- The student's progress is unsatisfactory. The project is not suitable for a degree sought through the College of Education, Psychology & Social Work. The student may then be asked to show cause why their candidature should not be terminated. This recommendation is likely to be rare.

The reasons for the decision should be clearly explained to the student. Once the review and proposal assessment meeting have been concluded, the Chair of the panel *(or, for Psychology students, the primary supervisor)* should advise the HDR Discipline Representative of the outcome, who will lodge the decision through the Inspire system.

Any required or recommended revisions should be identified in written feedback provided to the student by the panel chair (with assistance if desired from other panel members). In this case the student and supervisors will need to give consideration to these issues.

Substantive data collection should not commence until formal approval is given. The proposal is not a binding agreement to undertake the research that has been proposed, exactly as specified. We imagine the student will want to continue the research along the initial paths outlined, but we also understand how the research process unfolds, and would expect that the final thesis will be the result of that unfolding process, and will differ a little or perhaps a lot from the original plan submitted during the proposal process. In the (presumably rare) case of substantive changes to the planned project (e.g., a new or unrelated research questions or objectives), a new proposal would need to be prepared and assessed in line with the guidelines above.

4. Where to go for support

A list of contacts for support with a variety of HDR matters can be found here: http://www.flinders.edu.au/fms/Office%20of%20Graduate%20Research/documents/Final%20HDR%20Support%20Directory%2023%20April%202018.pdf

Contacts in the Office of Graduate Research can be found here: https://www.flinders.edu.au/graduate-research/contacts/contacts.cfm

Details for the University's HDR student representatives can be found here: https://www.flinders.edu.au/graduate-research/contacts/hdr-student-representatives.cfm

Table 1: Proposal process procedure in brief (Education & Social Work)

Action	Responsibility
Planning project and development of research proposal	Student and supervisor
Supervisor(s) approve written proposal	Supervisor
Start Milestone in Inspire	Student
Proposal Panel meets (Chaired by HDR representative or delegate – a senior academic). Two reviewers provide a critique of the suitability of the draft proposal for formal presentation.	Supervisor
Student makes any initial revisions recommended by the panel. Once approved, the proposal will proceed to a formal presentation	Student
Room and necessary equipment is organised.	Supervisor/ student
Proposal panel is assembled and invitations giving location and time of presentation are distributed to staff and postgraduate students.	Supervisor
Proposal is presented (see guidelines).	Student
Panel evaluates the merits of the proposal.	Panel
Postgraduate is advised of decision of the academic panel.	HDR representative or delegate
Written feedback provided to student.	HDR representative or delegate and principal supervisor
Student to complete milestone in *Inspire*.	Student
Supervisor to approve milestone outcome in *Inspire*.	Supervisor
Decision is lodged through *Inspire*.	HDR Discipline Representative

Table 2: Proposal process procedure in brief (Psychology)

Action	*Responsibility*
Planning project and development of research proposal (see separate guidelines).	Student and supervisor
Start milestone in *Inspire*.	Student
Organise proposal assessment meeting (comprised of the student, supervision team and two reviewers).	Student
Supervisor contacts potential reviewers to be on the panel.	Supervisor
Reviewers dictate when the proposal is to be sent before the meeting.	Reviewers
Proposal assessment meeting takes place.	Student, Supervisor(s) and Reviewers
Reviewers provide a critique of the suitability of the draft proposal (may also be in electronic form)	Reviewers
Prepare for oral presentation in Mind, Body & Cognition colloquium	Student & supervisor
Present in Mind, Body & Cognition colloquium (12 minutes)	Student
Student to complete milestone in *Inspire*.	Student
Supervisor to approve milestone outcome in *Inspire*.	Supervisor
Decision is lodged through *Inspire*.	HDR Discipline Representative