

Developing an Academic Persona: The PhD Confirmation Report as a Catalyst

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Research focus

The aim of our study -
to explore international students'
experiences of the confirmation stage
of their PhD journey



Surrey context - processes

- » Confirmation examination / confirmation viva
- » Normally takes place between 12 and 15 months after initial registration for full-time PhD and MD students
- » Involves a written report, (sometimes) an oral presentation and a discussion with examiners
- » Result: permitted to continue on the degree or required to resubmit



Academic persona

Externally facing

Academic persona – a kind of “public self whose original status comes from intellectual work and thinking” (Marshall, 2015, p.123)

Performing a persona through spoken and written genres (Heron and Yakovchuk, 2021)

Indicators (e.g. authorial voice)

Communities of practice and legitimate peripheral participation

A close-up photograph of a map with several red pushpins. The pushpins are of varying sizes and are placed at different locations on the map. The map itself is a standard street map with yellow and green colors. The pushpins are red with black stems. The background is a soft, out-of-focus white.

Beginning the journey of developing academic persona

- » Rituals: extremely satisfying rituals of initiation and acceptance into the academic ‘tribe’ (Carter, 2012, p. 281).
- » Legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991).
- » The PhD can be viewed as the ‘main apprenticeship into academic life’ (Tusting et al. 2019). Feedback plays a major role in this enculturation.



The PhD confirmation

“PhD confirmation reports, therefore, not only are gatekeeping and judging students' quality to undertake a doctoral research project but give students an important enculturation experience in which they ***are apprenticed to the disciplinary argumentation***”. (Jiang & Ma, 2018, p. 11)

Context: Participants & disciplines

P1	Sociology
P2	Higher Education
P3	Engineering
P4	Literature and Languages
P5	Business
P6	Education
P7	Hospitality and Tourism Management
P8	Business

Student to researcher: beginning a journey

- » It [the confirmation report] really gave me the foundation *to start your journey of doing your own research*. (P8)
- » So that's the way I was positioning myself because I saw this is the learning process *is the start point of my confirmation report* is not yet a solid report, but it's something that whatever is going to come, you need to accept [it] is for your progress and also to improve your own work. (P8)
- » I mean this is the *first objective that we want to reach by the end of the first year*. This is the outcome of my work and my thinking and my reading and that's the result they're going to see. (P2)
- » *And the first year I tried to jump from a student to a researcher*. But at this stage, and no one will tell us, what should I do, what should I study? And I just try to try to learn, try to find help from the supervisors or from the internet [...]. But the confirmation, the examiners [...] *will tell me from another side*. (P5)

Becoming independent

- » During the first year, you're mainly driven by your supervisor [...] OK, what's next? *How can I detach from him and do what will be the practical thing that will be the topic of my PhD?* (P3)
- » I really felt that it's *my own responsibility*, I mean for some people, they would say there are supervisors, for example in other universities, that would tell them write about this and write about that, but for me, I felt like it's *my own responsibility to decide*, because I am the person who read mostly about my topic, I'm the one who should have the best decision according to all the reviews I've read. *So I felt there is a big responsibility for me on decisions on what to include and what to write about.* (P2)
- » I *think its aim was to develop my own my own academic persona, my own research persona* in identifying a topic, identifying a subject that I'm interested in, conducting some literature review and getting everything together. (P1)

Claiming credibility

- » I think the purpose is to let others know that you conducted enough research like literature review, research, and you thought about your methods and your methodology, *and you're ready to undertake your project* and in a couple of years' time get your award, your PhD award. So it's basically about the academic conversation. *It's just to let people know that you're tuned in to whatever has been going on in your field.* (P1)
- » Report: It was *a way to prove that I can manage a big project, that I am aware of problems or obstacles that I may encounter, to show that I can solve problems in that sense, that I can manage timelines, that I have a realistic expectation of my own delivery...* (P7)
- » I wanted them to see that I'm *a critical researcher*, and I do have my own point of view and I'm looking at the literature in my own way, I'm *presenting my own vision*. I wanted to also show them that I do have *good thinking skills* and I do have *my own personal view*, even if it contradicts with many other previous researchers. (P2)

Building confidence

- » It is *a form of external validation*. You feel like, you know, you deserve to be where you are. Many people struggle with this imposter syndrome. And being told that, 'OK, you passed this formative assessment and we trust that you're going to do a good job', is very reassuring. [...] Reflecting back, it's a good way to see, OK, maybe *now I feel more confident as a researcher*. (P7)
- » So I believe that the purpose, for me, *I feel more confident going through that*, I can visualise what kind of questions I might expect in my final viva. So I think it has provided a little bit of window into that and given a taste of it. (P6)

What kind of researcher am I?

- » I think that was *the first time that I actually thought of myself in terms of the philosophical approach [as] a researcher*. I decided to change some things in the way I was doing my field work because of personal values and my own understanding of what research is or what an evaluation should be, how I should engage with participants. (P7)
- » ... also *thinking about that I'm a qualitative person, so how that methodology is, you know, what my personality is as well, why am I comfortable with that? Why do I feel that qualitative research is the actual research*, [...] why am I passionate about that, what are the areas which we can include, how flexible it is in terms of capturing the grey areas. [...] So having my own rationale and thinking, and my personality and my thoughts around the particular research method. *So aligning myself with that group of people, if you like*. (P6)

Summary

- » Individuality of experiences and journeys
- » Reflective and forward planning
- » Externalising credibility
- » Developing confidence and independence
- » Academic persona to researcher identity
- » Opportunity for deeper considerations about epistemology and ontology





Implications

- » Supporting in presenting a researcher persona through writing (and speaking)
- » Writing workshops e.g. style, signposting, language of research (e.g. epistemology)
- » Use of exemplars (e.g. templates, previous reports)
- » Opportunities to share research and writing with formative feedback
- » Informal opportunities to talk to peers e.g. research groups, buddies, mentoring

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