

Confirmation of candidature

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Contents

Background

Key players

Role play assignments

Principal Supervisor

Associate Supervisor

Centre Director

Postgraduate Coordinator

Student

Author's comments on using this case study

General information

The task

The process

What usually happens

Recommended reading

Background

A part-time PhD student, Jan Town, is undertaking the Confirmation Process for a study on "Leadership, Learning Styles and Project Management in the IT Profession". Confirmation is required by the University's PhD Regulations to take place after twelve months of a fulltime candidature. Jan is about three months late with this.

Having submitted his/her written documentation three weeks ago, Jan presented an entertaining, well-structured seminar two days ago. The seminar was attended by staff and students in the research centre. Jan had real difficulty answering two questions from Dr Sandy Bright who regularly asks "difficult" theoretical questions in Confirmation seminars. The Confirmation Panel met after the seminar to determine whether to recommend Confirmation or not. They could not reach agreement.

The study involves a fieldwork-based enquiry (which has generated a significant amount of data that hasn't been analysed yet) and a laboratory phase which Ms/Mr Town's supervisor believes will require the student to work with the School's technical staff to adapt computer equipment for further data analysis.

The student's earlier Application and brief research proposal (three months into the candidature) had been referred back to the Faculty by the University Research Degrees Committee for clarification of the supervisory arrangements, the inclusion of a more detailed reference list, and the clarification of a hypothesis.

Key players

Principal Supervisor – Prof Lesley Smith

- Has supervised six PhDs to completion
- Took the student on six months ago at the Head of School's request after another senior staff member took voluntary early retirement
- Believes the student hasn't been putting in the necessary time

Associate Supervisor – Dr Jackie Jones

- Impressed by aspects of the Confirmation seminar
- Has met with Mr/Ms Town twice after one joint supervision meeting early in the candidature

Centre Director – Prof Augie Rousseau

- Concerned about the regularity of supervision since the change of Principal Supervisor
- Believes that the study will contribute to the reputation of the Centre and to ongoing research directions

School Postgraduate Studies Coordinator – Dr Lindsay Tucker

- Has told other staff members that s/he wishes to place the student under review

Student – Mr/s Jan Town

- Wants to apply for a scholarship to study full-time next year
- Does not understand why her presentation was not rated well
- Feels overburdened by the university's bureaucracy, having already had difficulties when submitting the initial application and brief research proposal, has had a change of Principal Supervisor, and problems with her computer

Role play assignments

For Principal Supervisor – Prof Lesley Smith

You have supervised six PhDs to completion.

You took the student on six months ago at the Head of School's request after another senior staff member (Dr Pike) took voluntary early retirement.

You have found the student to be "not a very good listener" and believe the student's candidature might have to be terminated.

What the others don't know yet

(You may decide to reveal this at any point in the process or keep it to yourself and simply behave accordingly.)

You have applied for Professional Development Program (PDP) leave for the following semester to work overseas on a related project and have been advised informally by the Head of School that you have a good chance of success so it's likely you won't be around to continue with Jan.

For Associate Supervisor – Dr Jackie Jones

You feel uninvolved in the supervision process though you were impressed by aspects of the Confirmation seminar.

There was one joint supervision meeting early in the candidature and you have had two subsequent productive meetings discussing methodology issues alone with the student. You believe that there is little, if any, recognition of this contribution by the Principal Supervisor.

What the others don't know yet:

(You may decide to reveal this at any point in the process or keep it to yourself and simply behave accordingly.)

You have established a dialogue with two researchers at a leading State university in the United States. These people are potentially ideal examiners for this thesis.

You would like to take over as Principal Supervisor. This has been discussed with the student and the Postgraduate Studies Coordinator but not with the Centre Director.

For Centre Director – Prof Augie Rousseau

You are concerned about the regularity of supervision since the change of Principal Supervisor, but believe that the study will contribute to the reputation of the Centre and to ongoing research directions. You've got an industry player lined up to fund an extension of the research.

What the others don't know yet:

(You may decide to reveal this at any point in the process or keep it to yourself and simply behave accordingly.)

The Centre is due to be reviewed next year. Future funding will depend on postgraduate enrolments and completions.

You want to apply pressure to the Principal Supervisor to increase contact with the student.

For School Postgraduate Studies Coordinator – Dr Lindsay Tucker

You have told other staff members that you have become dubious about the intellectual capacity of the student to complete a doctoral level study, and you believe it would be prudent to place the student under review or downgrade the study to a Masters so it can be completed quickly.

What the others don't know yet:

(You may decide to reveal this at any point in the process or keep it to yourself and simply behave accordingly.)

You believe the technical support for the study is more costly than has been estimated. Who will pay – the Centre or the Faculty?

For Student – Mr/s Jan Town

You want to apply for a scholarship to study full-time from next year.

You feel overburdened by University red tape, having had difficulties at the time of submitting your brief research proposal.

You have had to accept a change of Principal Supervisor.

You have had computer problems.

You are confused as to why your presentation was not rated well.

What the others don't know yet:

(You may decide to reveal this at any point in the process or keep it to yourself and simply behave accordingly.)

You have been offered supervision by a highly published expert (Dr Brooks) at another university and are thinking of taking up the offer.

Author's comments on using this case study

General information

This case study is used as the material for a session in which small groups conduct a meeting to decide the future of the student. Each participant plays the role of one of the key players in the case, and there is an observer/ note taker in each mock meeting.

This exercise can be managed by a single facilitator working with up to six groups of six workshop participants.

One hour is sufficient to run this exercise.

Supervisors at any level of experience can enjoy and learn from this experience.

You need enough space for each small group to be able to conduct a "meeting". Background information should be printed for all participants, and you need to print enough copies of the role play assignments to distribute to the participants who will take each role.

The benefit of running this session as a mock meeting with participants playing roles is that you have the opportunity to highlight the hidden agendas which supervisors, administrators and students bring to their interactions. Having an observer and note taker at each "meeting" allows all groups to learn how processes may take very different courses when they convene in a final plenary.

The task

The School Postgraduate Studies Coordinator calls a meeting with the student, the two supervisors and the Centre Director. The agenda is to clarify key issues relating to the student's progress, the options for future action, and the formal report and recommendation to be made to the University Research Degrees Committee.

The Process

Preparation (10 –15 minutes)

The facilitator distributes the background information to all participants and explains the task, the timing of the session, and the role of the observer (to comment on the process to the small group and report to the plenary). The facilitator should ask if any clarifications are needed, encourage participants to go with the flow of the role plays, invent extra personal characteristics and facts of the case; and importantly to have some fun with the exercise even while they recognize the seriousness and complexity of the underlying issues.

The participants take a few moments to consider:

- The relevant sections of the University's Confirmation Regulations (The QUT regulations are available in the QUT Handbook online at http://www.qut.edu.au/pubs/hbk_current/courses/IF49.html#12 A facilitator at another institution would use the local rules if they have a procedure which more or less parallels our "Confirmation"; or you can adapt the role play even further to suit whichever significant milestone is available within the structures of your own research degrees.)
- Their own perspectives
- Their key questions or concerns.

Form groups of six and distribute individual role play assignments. At this point they should share the names of their roles and their function eg (Centre Director). Invite the participants to vary the gender of their role as necessary, but it is useful for each role to have a name. Make sure that the participants don't reveal their hidden agendas at this point. You will need to prepare individual slips of paper for each participant. It's useful to give the observer/note taker all of the role play assignments – this will assist the observer in keeping track of what's actually going on. (The person playing the Postgraduate Coordinator's role is responsible for keeping to the schedule and conducting the meeting, and drawing some firm conclusions at the end of the meeting, so you may want to "volunteer" someone who can deal with these tasks.)

After roles are assigned, student and supervisors meet briefly, as do the Centre Director and the Postgraduate Coordinator, to prepare for the meeting. This step suggests that up to a point the Centre Director and the Postgraduate Studies Coordinator might be expected to share an institutional view of the matters under discussion and that the other three participants might (again up to a point) share a different viewpoint because they are actually involved in the project at the coalface. These supposed "alliances" may be crystallized to some extent in the preliminary meeting; and this should add to the "drama" when more of the hidden agendas start to emerge in the formal meeting.

Then the players of the Postgraduate Coordinator's role convene the group meetings.

The meeting (about 15 minutes)

The group should attempt to reach a decision about what is to happen next with the student's candidature and supervision. They should specify any conditions and reasons. The observer/ note taker should be able to outline the key points to be covered in the recommendation to the University Research Degrees Committee.

The facilitator should move around the groups and note any common themes for discussion or critical moments s/he wants to discuss in the plenary.

Small group debriefing (about 15 minutes)

With the help of the observer, the group discusses what happened in the meeting. What was each participant thinking? Did each feel that her/his concerns were addressed? Is each satisfied with the outcome? What went well? Did the group miss something?

Conclusion (about 20 minutes)

The whole workshop group comes together for a facilitated discussion of outcomes and the formulation of personal action plans in response to the outcomes of the exercise.

What usually happens

Here are some of the things that come up in the session. It's possible to facilitate the plenary towards focal themes which you've predetermined or to use the exercise more as a means of opening up the issue of the diversity and uniqueness of each supervisor/student relationship.

1. What do groups usually recommend? Do recommendations differ a lot?

The recommendations vary widely in terms of the student's fate and in terms of the range of other factors which emerge. These variations provide an initial discussion point in the plenary. Groups grapple with a variety of re-arrangements of the supervision eg Associate to replace Principal Supervisor, permanently or pro-tem? Some groups focus on recommendations to do with staff behaviour rather than the student eg Is the Principal Supervisor to be allowed to opt out?

2. What issues do groups usually identify?

They will pick up on the "facts" of the case and dispute certain aspects - they may note, for instance, that Jan is part-time and that the University seems to be expecting her to progress as rapidly as a full-time student ("three months late"). And discussion then ensues about

how realistic the timelines are that are laid out in the Regulations, and this can lead into useful discussion about the project management aspects of candidature and supervision. The groups also tend to identify institutional pressures on staff eg budget pressures, pressure for completions and they talk about how to protect students from these things or for instance how much students have to share in these matters which the supervisors and others are facing.

3. **The hidden role play information usually comes out**, although the student's trump card is often not played until late in the piece, and might not emerge at all if the outcome proposed seems to address her/his concerns- this is a particularly powerful ploy in light of inter-University competition for completions and RTS places.
4. **What is typically said about the process of the mock meeting?**
Why isn't the Head of School at the meeting??!! Would it be normal for the student to attend such a meeting? Can the student be asked to leave the meeting temporarily? (This can be left to the discretion of the Chair – whatever happens has implications which can be picked up in the plenary.)
5. **There are things which are sometimes ignored** so you have to raise them yourself eg the importance of this Confirmation procedure (and the earlier "proposal" stage) for formative assessment, and how ongoing feedback and an appropriate schedule of contact might have improved the situation. Secondly, much of the content of the meeting usually focuses on the more technical aspects of the candidature rather than the substantive issue of what's going on in the research project and whether the research is valuable etc.

Power differentials between staff and student and between staff should be discussed if that doesn't come up. In addition, the scenario and individual role assignments provide a launch pad for discussion of many important issues relating to candidature and supervision at both a pedagogical and a policy level. The facilitator should determine in advance which of these should be highlighted in the event that they don't emerge.

6. **What do people come up with for their personal action plans at the end?**
Exploring more effectively the role of the Associate Supervisor is a common one – from the perspective of the junior staff member as well as that of the more senior mentoring supervisor.

Recommended reading

Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee Code of Practice for Maintaining and Monitoring Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Degrees, particularly the sections on the responsibilities of the various parties:

http://www.avcc.edu.au/news/public_statements/publications/cophd.htm