Developing Researcher Identity Through the PhD Confirmation

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Abstract

The PhD confirmation, or upgrade stage, is a key requirement and rite of passage for most doctoral students. Yet despite its significance and high-stakes nature, little attention has been paid to students' experiences of this stage of the PhD journey and how it influences the development of their researcher identity. Through semi-structured interviews with PhD students from a range of disciplines who had recently successfully completed the confirmation stage, we found that for many the confirmation stage was a catalyst for 'feeling' like a researcher through external validation, recognition and legitimacy. Students also developed their researcher identity through talking about their research with significant others. We argue for recognising the pivotal role the confirmation stage plays in developing doctoral students' researcher identity and offer suggestions on how supervisors and researcher developers can support students through this transition.

Practitioner Notes

1. Supervisors and doctoral students can have open and explicit discussions about the role of the confirmation stage in supporting researcher identity.
2. Supervisors can encourage doctoral students to share their feelings of 'being' a researcher and what validates their researcher identity.
3. Supervisors can ensure the provision of support for doctoral students who are struggling with the confirmation stage.
4. Students can be provided with linguistic and rhetorical support to develop authorial voice which has an impact on researcher identity.
5. Supervisors can encourage conversations around experiences of transitioning from student to researcher as part of the doctoral journey and the impact of assessment and other key milestones.

Keywords

Researcher identity; doctoral student; PhD; confirmation viva; confirmation report

Introduction

The journey of developing a researcher identity of doctoral students has been well documented (Choi et al., 2021). But when does that journey start? Carter et al. (2021) suggest that PhD students "become researchers as they learn methods; they become recognised as researchers by their discipline community as they develop an appropriate voice in their academic writing" (p. 284). Whilst external recognition of researcher identity by others is significant to the transition from student to researchers, and for recognition by and into a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), in this study we were interested in how the PhD confirmation supported students' *own* internal perspectives on their researcher identity.

The confirmation, also referred to as upgrade or PhD transfer, is an officially recognised administrative point in the doctoral journey. McGloin (2021) refers to such institutional level progression and monitoring processes as 'moorings': "These moorings can provide fixity which facilitates mobility along the doctoral journey by providing effective validation, encouragement and a sense of personal location in a doctoral space" (p. 373). We argue that the confirmation stage can be viewed as a 'mooring' in this sense as it fulfils a monitoring role through summative feedback and provides validation through successful confirmation examination and formative feedback. We also suggest that this important stage acts as a catalyst in stimulating the development of doctoral students' researcher identities and provides an opportunity for them to engage in the 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave & Wenger, 1991) of their disciplinary academic community. Writing on the role of the confirmation report, Jiang and Ma (2018) state: "PhD confirmation reports […] 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" (p. 11).

Whilst we recognise arguments that transitions from student to researcher are unfixed and rhizomatic (Gravett, 2021), we also argue that fixed points are not incompatible with fluidity and individual experiences. Indeed, formal and official stages such as the PhD confirmation can provide guidance within the unfamiliar and messy landscape of doctoral education.

Literature Review

Researcher identity

Identity involves the positioning of "self and others" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 586) in social situations: "being recognized as a certain 'kind of person' in a given context" (Gee 2000, p. 99). Identity is therefore active (Sarangi & Roberts,1999), influenced by context and other people (Donaghue, 2020; Gee, 2000; Olsen, 2011), and performed in situated social practices (Sarangi & Roberts, 1999). As doctoral students engage with others both within their institution (e.g., supervisors and other academics, other doctoral students, study and research groups)

and outside (e.g., conference attendees), they perform researcher identities (Ai, 2017; Jazvac-Martek, 2009; Klenowski et al., 2011). They form relationships which nurture their growing knowledge and research skills, and further contribute to the development of their researcher identities (Dollarhide et al., 2013; Inouye & McAlpine, 2017; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017). These relationships include peers who often engage in supportive and scholarly activities such as sharing writing for critical feedback, a collaborative process which also engenders identity development (Crossouard et al., 2008; Maher et al., 2008, Murakami-Ramalho et al., 2013).

In a systematic review of empirical literature examining doctoral students' identity development as scholars, Choi et al. (2021) echo these social, performative and contextual aspects of researcher identity, offering the following definition of researcher identity: "recognition by self and others of possessing and exhibiting adequate levels of competence, confidence, autonomy, and agency with respect to scholarly activities, products, and communities" (p. 90). Such recognition is closely linked with legitimacy and validation, which are common themes in the doctoral research literature. Mantai (2017), for example, talks of the importance of validation in helping doctoral students 'feel' like researchers. External validation leads to internal validation which brings the confidence and self-belief that are crucial for identifying as a researcher. Mantai's study explores how different research-related activities, both formal and informal, act as 'turning points' for students to experience themselves as researchers.

Indeed, successful accomplishment of institutional doctoral processes such as chapter drafts, confirmation and final viva examinations, and seminar presentations all bring recognition and validation (Choi et al., 2020) and are an important way for doctoral students to perform academic identities through various spoken and written genres (Heron & Yakovchuk, 2021). Other course activities such as tutorial and supervisor discussions also validate doctoral researcher identities (Donaghue & Adams, in review), especially as they enable reflection and interaction, important vehicles for identity construction (Ai, 2017; Foot et al., 2014). Validation and legitimacy are also gained through extra-curricular activities such as collaboration on research projects, acceptance of conference proposals, and presenting at conferences (Åkerlind, 2008; Mantai, 2017). All these activities legitimise students' *academic persona* which has been defined as a kind of "public self whose original status comes from intellectual work and thinking" (Marshall, 2015, p. 123). They also increase students' confidence, further contributing to the development of their researcher identities (Åkerlind, 2008; Mantai, 2017).

Another factor in researcher identity development is the student – supervisor relationship which is pivotal to the success of the PhD (Benmore, 2016; Gravett, Kinchin & Winstone, 2022; Hemer, 2012). Benmore (2016), for example, characterises the supervisory relationship as a "close, but mutually respectful, relationship" (p. 1252) which can be broad in scope, ranging from novice – expert relationships to co-partners. The former positions the student as the apprentice, and the supervisor as the master, whereas the latter positions the student more as a co-researcher and colleague.

Researchers recognise, however, that the journey of validation, legitimacy and developing a doctoral researcher identity is often far from straightforward (Murphy et al., 2014) and is "punctuated with tensions" (Choi et al., 2021, p. 114). Identity tensions include students feeling unable to match up to an ideal researcher image gleaned from (commonly white and male)

academic role models, a tension exacerbated in minority groups (Hinojosa & Carney, 2016; Murakami-Ramalho et al., 2008; Teeuwsen et al., 2014). The complexity of doctoral researcher identity development was reflected in Mantai's (2017) study where her participants seemed to be moving back and forth between the two ends of the student to researcher spectrum, "crossing personal thresholds and reaching turning points, while gradually approaching the researcher status with increasing expertise, practice, and confidence" (p. 647).

The confirmation examination

Choi et al. (2020) highlight the role of mediating artifacts in aiding the development of researcher identity, including formalised milestones such as examinations. The purpose of the confirmation examination is to "convince examiners of a competent display of disciplinary knowledge, significance and feasibility of their research projects in a stimulating and persuasive manner in order to have their doctoral candidature confirmed" (Jiang & Ma, 2018, p. 1). Due to the paucity of literature on the confirmation examination specifically, we turn briefly to the literature on the final PhD examination as the confirmation mirrors this final assessment in many ways (e.g., summative, high stakes, performance of knowledge through written and oral forms). The PhD viva can be viewed as an 'apprenticeship' into academic life (Tusting et al., 2019) and a rite of passage (Amran & Ibrahim, 2012; Carter & Whittaker, 2009; Mežek & Swales, 2016), involving "extremely satisfying rituals of initiation and acceptance into the academic 'tribe'" (Carter, 2012, p. 281). Although PhD theses are widely and publicly available through university libraries and the Ethos repository (British Library), the PhD viva in the UK "occurs privately and mysteriously behind closed doors" (Carter, 2012, p. 273), prompting some to refer to the viva as a 'secret garden' (Wellington, 2010) and thus an occluded genre (Paltridge & Starfield, 2020). The confirmation viva in some institutions is open, but in this study site it is closed, attended only by the two examiners and PhD supervisors. Furthermore, examples of confirmation reports are often difficult to obtain.

There is a large body of research which identifies expectations of the final PhD viva and thesis, and a plethora of advisory texts on 'how to' write a thesis and defend it. Mežek and Swales (2016, p. 3) have observed that in defending PhD theses candidates perform their academic persona, and whilst that is true, we argue that the process of developing this researcher or academic persona starts much earlier than the final PhD viva. Despite its importance, little is known about the confirmation stage, and its role in the development of researcher identities. This study seeks to shed some light on this occluded stage in the PhD journey by exploring doctoral students' experiences of the PhD confirmation and its role in the development of their researcher identities.

Methodology

Context

At the institution where this research took place, the confirmation examination is generally held between 12 and 15 months after initial registration for full-time doctoral students. It involves a written report, (sometimes) an oral presentation and a discussion with examiners (the actual

confirmation viva). At the site of this study, there are usually two internal examiners who conduct the viva. Both are from within the discipline or near discipline of the PhD candidate. Students must pass the confirmation examination to continue on to the full PhD degree. If they are not confirmed in the first round, candidates will be required to either resubmit the report, or both resubmit the report and re-take the viva. If they do not pass the resubmission, they may be allowed to register for an MPhil or their doctoral study will be terminated. As such, the confirmation examination is a high-stakes activity that bears directly on the whole PhD process and its outcome.

Participants

Eight PhD students who had recently (within 12 months at the time of the interviews) successfully passed their confirmation first time agreed to take part in this study. All PhD students were invited through the Doctoral College newsletter to attend a 30-minute semi-structured interview held through and recorded in Microsoft Teams. Many of the students had engaged with the support and development activities provided by the Doctoral College such as workshops, writing retreats and one-on-one support. All PhD students were speakers of English as a second language, from a range of countries including Brazil, China and Pakistan, and all were based in the UK studying on site at the same university. Ethical approval was granted by the institution. All participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

Table 1

Participants and Disciplines

Participant	Discipline of PhD studies
P1	Sociology
P2	Higher Education
P3	Engineering
P4	Literature and Languages
P5	Business
P6	Higher Education
P7	Hospitality and Tourism
P8	Business

Research methods

This study used semi-structured interviews to provide guidance and structure, but also ensure flexibility for the researcher to probe areas of interest. Semi-structured interviews are recognised as allowing space for dialogue between the researcher and participant, and for the participant to consider features of their confirmation experience not previously considered (Husband, 2020).

This paper reports on one aspect of a wider study which aimed to explore PhD students' experiences of the linguistic expectations (written and spoken) of the confirmation stage. The interview questions (see Appendix A) were designed with this aim in mind. We designed the questions to capture PhD students' experiences of the affordances and challenges of communicating their work, both written and oral, in a second language. In particular, we were interested in how they managed writing their confirmation report and presenting their work during the viva in a second language. However, during our analysis, it became clear that a key and consistent theme across all the data related to students' developing researcher identities. Participants articulated their internal, subjective perceptions and experiences of their development as researchers.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Reflexive thematic analysis allows the researcher to bring their own subjectivity to the data analysis and draws on this subjectivity as a 'resource' (Holliday, 2007). We were interested in how participants framed their experiences of the confirmation and thus sought to represent their internal processes. Author 1 and 2 coded one interview transcript each individually and then discussed a series of codes. We were mindful of our subjectivity and positionality (Braun & Clarke, 2019), and we recognised the fact that two coders can bring multiple insights "to sense-check ideas, or to explore multiple assumptions or interpretations of the data" (Byrne, 2022, p. 393). Following the first two analyses, the researchers agreed to focus on academic-researcher persona in the data, and the remaining transcripts were shared between the two researchers and were analysed according to this broad theme. The final stage was a discussion between author 1 and 2 to confirm, describe and exemplify the emerging sub-themes and data examples.

Findings

In this section we present our participants' voices as they describe the role the confirmation stage played in their researcher identity development through five specific areas that emerged in the process of our data analysis.

Starting the journey

It is significant how participants themselves framed their development as researchers. The preparation towards the confirmation, in the form of writing the report, provided a boost and a key point in propelling them towards the goal of becoming a researcher.

> It [the confirmation report] really gave me the foundation to start your journey of doing your own research… So that's the way I was positioning myself because I saw this is the learning process, 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 for your progress and also to improve your own work. (P8)

Passing the confirmation allowed participants to have agency by doing their 'own' research. The physical artefact of the report mediates this researcher development. The research is still in its infancy, but it now 'belongs' to the student and they can mould it as they wish, based on feedback.

There was a sense of 'crossing over' from one side to another with the confirmation representing the hurdle or barrier. Crossing over signifies validation and acceptance into the disciplinary community of practice, and can benefit from examiners' input:

> 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 learn, try to find help from the supervisors or from the internet [...]. But the confirmation, the examiners […] will tell me from another side. (P5)

There was also recognition that the confirmation stage is important in acting as an additional step in the process of 'selecting' candidates who are capable of achieving a PhD; as one of our participants put it, it is "like a filtering system in a way" (P3).

In the same way as the final PhD viva is described as a ritual and part of the tradition of the PhD, the confirmation viva can also be viewed as a ritual: "…it looks more like an academic ritual, […] as a sociologist, we learn how those social rituals work, like marriages or births, or baptism, and the viva just looks like an academic ritual. (P1)

Rituals provide clearly articulated and established processes at specific points in a timeline. They can be comforting and familiar, as members of the community share an understanding of the expectations of the tradition. Generally, rituals can also involve a crossing, or threshold. In this way, the confirmation is perceived as a door through which one must pass to become a researcher.

Opportunity for agency and autonomy

Independence, from supervisor and to make decisions, brings responsibilities which were embraced by participants, as it was felt that becoming independent was part of developing a researcher identity. For example, participant three saw the confirmation stage as allowing them to become "detached" from the supervisor and focus on their own chosen PhD topic: "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)

The confirmation stage, and writing the report in particular, was perceived to be the student's own responsibility, and not one to take lightly:

> 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)

Independence was articulated in terms of taking control of one's own research and claiming ownership of the project. For example, "I think its [confirmation stage] 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)

Feeling validated and gaining credibility

The confirmation stage also provided an opportunity for external validation as part of joining the academic community. The participants below spoke of demonstrating critical thinking and readiness, and they sought affirmation from others – in this case, their examiners. Such recognition validates the students' transition towards emerging as experts in their field and thus credible researchers.

> 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)

> I needed to have a sense of the quality of the work achieved so far, so first of all, knowing if it was valid enough, considered as a good project by the academic community, and also I needed to get some feedback, because obviously the examiners are experienced researchers. […] I was aiming to demonstrate that, as a researcher, I was able to only present and defend my work, but also have a positive discussion with researchers and they're eventually the people to whom I am hoping to disseminate. (P4)

Both participants 1 and 4 above describe the importance of demonstrating their critical thinking through written work and the viva. The confirmation gave them the opportunity and the platform to assert their knowledge, skills and thus credibility as researchers, and to seek validation. The power of the oral conversation in affirming this was seen as fundamental. However, claiming credibility as a researcher is not just about the academic knowledge and research skills; it also includes credibility as a project manager – "to see if the candidate is mature enough to have a plan" (P3). In this sense, students see researcher identity not only as constituting disciplinary expertise but also organisational skills and metacognitive awareness which are required to complete a PhD. This is summed up by P7:

> It [the confirmation report] 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)

Demonstrating individuality was also seen as key to accessing the disciplinary community of practice as a researcher. However, unlike the theme below which highlights internal validation, P2 seeks *external* recognition of autonomy through recognition of their 'own' work, their 'own personal view' and their criticality.

> I wanted them [examiners] 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)

Developing confidence

Linked to the theme of external validation was the confidence and internal validation that this can bring. Confidence was seen as fundamental to developing researcher identity, and the opportunity to demonstrate knowledge, expertise and successfully pass the confirmation assessment helped doctoral candidates to develop that confidence. The participant below talks of the importance of being 'trusted' to carry on with the research and how this contributes to their researcher identity.

> 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)

Another participant who gained confidence from the confirmation process saw it as an opportunity to prepare for the final viva. It is essentially the final viva which determines and validates the researcher and so preparation for that is seen as instrumental.

> 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)

Along with developing confidence *as a result* of the validation provided by the confirmation process, our participants talked about the importance of peer interactions as helping them build their confidence *in preparation* for their confirmation viva. Amongst the activities they found most helpful were talking to fellow doctoral researchers who had already passed their confirmation, looking at examples of confirmation reports shared by their peers and presenting their research to others before their confirmation viva, thus highlighting the role a researcher community plays in the process of researcher confidence building and identity development.

A catalyst for epistemic reflections

As previously mentioned, the confirmation stage acted as a catalyst for thinking, and articulating and evidencing the research conducted thus far. Some participants grappled with the fundamental philosophy of their research in terms of their epistemological stance. Their stance is strongly linked to who they are as a researcher, the very core of their researcher identity, and the confirmation stage provided space for students to reflect on this.

> 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)

Participant 6 below elaborates on how their epistemology and personality are interlinked. The confirmation stage prompted them to consider their emotional and personal connection with their research, and in doing so, finding their place in the chosen community of practice. The participant talks about being able to recognise their own epistemological stance in order to seek out and join groups which reflect the same beliefs and values.

> … 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... the research is not about just black and white and yes and no. So there is a lot more to a set of data if you like rather than it being one concrete answer. So the research is not about just finding one concrete solution, it can go in different ways depending on how we interpret things, what we bring to the research topic and what we are aiming at. So thinking of myself in those lines and why do I believe that? 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)

For this participant, it was important to show not only how they align with the qualitative methodology itself, but also with qualitative researchers as a community of practice.

Discussion

The confirmation viva, or the PhD upgrade, is an important milestone in doctoral students' journey. It signifies a pivotal point, a formal moment with a formal research output (Mantai, 2017). The confirmation allows students to *perform* as a researcher and in doing so, it provides opportunities for them to *identify* as a researcher (Mantai, 2017). In this study, we were interested in how the confirmation made participants *experience being* researchers.

Our results highlighted how the PhD confirmation provided material, affective and cognitive support to developing researcher identity. In terms of material support, the confirmation, with its institutional and formalised norms reflected in the submission of documents, acted as a turning point, a mooring (McGloin, 2021) from which students could navigate their journey and transition to researcher. Opportunities for measurement and evaluation, e.g., confirmation viva and report, have been recognised as mediating artefacts which help to develop a researcher identity (Choi et al., 2020). In our study, participants embraced the opportunity to perform their knowledge through the confirmation report and physical presence in the viva. This formal milestone allowed participants to prepare, perform their researcher identity and cross the threshold to becoming a researcher.

The confirmation also played a role in providing affective support in the journey to researcher identity. As the name 'confirmation' itself suggests, passing the confirmation confirms and validates students' researcher identity. Internal validation is contingent on external validation,

especially in a public space (Mantai, 2017) such as a confirmation viva: "students need to feel validated as a researcher by oneself and others" (Mantai, 2017, p. 637). External validation provides legitimacy, which is "confirmation regarding knowledge, skills and activities associated with being a scholar" (Choi et al., 2020, p. 112). Confidence, trust in one's own work and autonomy derive from this legitimisation. There was a strong sense of pride in students' own research, and the confirmation viva gave them an opportunity to perform their knowledge and expertise.

Significant others, such as the supervisor, can influence the development of researcher identity. As the student becomes more accomplished as a researcher, the relationship of novice – expert makes a "gradual shift to power-sharing" (Benmore, 2016, p. 1253). Significant others also include the examiners. Participants discussed how the desire for external recognition, mainly from the examiners, who they see as experts and members of the research community, played a pivotal role in their confirmation performance. At the same time, internal recognition of developing expertise allowed participants to be more autonomous. Participants spoke of the importance for autonomy and agency, and for breaking free from their supervisor. Regardless of where the student is along the continuum of novice – expert, the nature of the supervisory relationship positions them as a student. Thus, a desire to 'detach' from the supervisor could be attributed to this need for autonomy and researcher identity.

Cognitive support for developing researcher identity was perceived in terms of both epistemic reflections on research and articulating these beliefs through written and oral activities. Understanding one's own epistemological perspectives can help one resonate with a particular group of researchers or communities and can build confidence in joining a disciplinary community of practice. Grappling with and talking about issues of core beliefs and values with respect to research, particularly in the viva (Mantai, 2017), can help consolidate fundamental features of the research. At the same time, claiming an authorial voice and demonstrating disciplinary knowledge have been found to be fundamental to performing academic persona (Thompson, Morton & Storch, 2016). A socio-cultural perspective on learning rests upon the co-construction of knowledge with a more expert other (Daniels, 2002) through talk. This can be seen in the context of preparing for the confirmation, with the supervisor, or in the viva itself, with examiners. Participants in this study welcomed the opportunity to articulate their research approaches and underpinning principles both in writing (through their confirmation report) and by talking about their research, and these activities helped them to reflect on their researcher position and 'feel' like researchers.

To summarise, despite the high stakes and summative nature of the confirmation stage, it can in fact play a significant role in supporting researcher identity development in a number of important ways. Yet, the confirmation report and viva are still occluded genres, largely hidden from public view, with little scholarship surrounding confirmation policy and practices. Given the importance of the confirmation viva in supporting researcher identity, we make a plea to place research and practice around the confirmation firmly on the agenda of supporting doctoral students. In the section below we make a number of recommendations based on the findings of this study.

Conclusion

To summarise, our research has focused on the PhD confirmation, or upgrade stage, and its role in the development of doctoral students' researcher identities. Whilst acknowledging that the process of researcher identity formation is by no means linear or straightforward, our findings point to the importance of this stage in enabling students to feel like, and experience being researchers. The confirmation acted as a 'turning' point and as a catalyst for the complex identity work happening along the 'student-researcher' continuum, providing scaffolding in the form of the material, affective and cognitive support to developing researcher identities.

We acknowledge that there are two key limitations to this study. First, the cohort of participants was small, and all were international PhD students. Second, we only recruited participants who had successfully passed the confirmation first time. Further research with a wider sample of participants including both UK-based students and those who were not successful first time would shed light on possible different trajectories of researcher identity development. However, recruiting the latter group of participants would need to be sensitively managed.

Notwithstanding the limitations above, based on our findings we make a number of recommendations for practice and research. First, supervisors and doctoral educators need to make explicit recognition of the fundamental role the confirmation plays in providing opportunities for researcher development. Choi et al. (2020) suggest that supervisors and others involved in doctoral education should have explicit discussions about the transition from student to researcher, including being transparent about their own vulnerabilities. Second, given the influence of the confirmation on driving internal validation, it is important to recognise and support students who do not pass first time. If passing provides confirmation and legitimacy, failing can have a negative and destabilising impact on their researcher identity. Third, educators and students can bring the affective into training and discussion. Students can discuss their feelings about becoming a researcher, what helps them feel like a researcher, such as external and internal validation, and what impedes these feelings. Supervisors can also share their own experiences. These discussions can be in tandem with open and frank discussions with supervisors on roles and responsibilities, and the changing trajectory of novice – expert roles.

Finally, as Thompson et al. (2016) highlight, authorial voice can support researcher identity. Doctoral education can include provision of linguistic and rhetorical support for students to perform researcher identity and position themselves as experts in their written work (report) and their spoken work (viva). The genre of a confirmation report is highly occluded; thus, we suggest bringing the genre to light through sharing of reports, explicitly discussing the structure, functions and communicative purposes of a report. Genre analysis can be empowering (Hyland, 2007) to all writers and supports researcher development. In terms of the confirmation viva, whilst recordings may not be possible for ethical reasons, students who have completed the viva can be encouraged to share experiences of the event itself, e.g., how was it structured, what types of questions were asked. This can be extended to peer practice, role plays and mock vivas. Supervisors and researcher developers can ensure a variety of networking opportunities so students can practice talking about their work and finding their voice as researchers.

We call for more research into this important stage of the PhD journey and for more explicit recognition of the pivotal role the confirmation plays in supporting doctoral students' researcher identity development. In particular, further research could explore the experiences of PhD students who are unsuccessful in passing their confirmation and the reasons for their failure. This could involve the perspectives of students, supervisors and examiners. Given the importance of the confirmation in the development of researcher identity, implications from these findings could inform support provided to students who may be struggling with their research.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. How did you find the overall experience of the confirmation stage?
2. What do you see as the purpose(s) of the confirmation stage?
3. Let's talk about your experiences of writing your report.
- How did you feel about writing your confirmation report?
- What were you aiming to demonstrate in your confirmation report?
- Was there anything that you found easy or relatively easy to do whilst writing your confirmation report?
- Were there any challenges and/or barriers when preparing your confirmation report?
- As a non-native English speaker, did you have any particular challenges in writing a confirmation report? If yes, how did you overcome them?
- Did you make use of any support provided within or outside the University to help you prepare for the report? Any resources that you found useful?
4. Let's talk about your experiences of doing the viva.
- How did you feel about giving a presentation during your confirmation viva?
- What were you aiming to demonstrate in your presentation and viva?
- Was there anything that you found easy or relatively easy when giving your presentation / your viva?
- Were there any challenges and/or barriers when giving your presentation and / or viva?
- As a non-native English speaker, did you have any particular challenges in giving your presentation / viva? If yes, how did you overcome them?
- Did you make use of any support provided within or outside the University to help you prepare for the viva? Any resources that you found useful?
5. Which part of your confirmation stage (the report or the viva) did you feel most confident about and why?
6. Which part of your confirmation stage (the report or the viva) did you find most challenging and why?
7. What support can be provided for students like yourself to help them better prepare for their PhD confirmation?
8. How did you feel when you found out you had passed the confirmation stage?

Conflict of Interest