

## The public defence seminar

### The doctoral thesis

A Swedish doctoral thesis can be written in two forms: either as a monograph or as a compilation thesis consisting of a number of papers and a “kappa” (introductory chapter). The “kappa” can vary in length (depending on the length, scope and number of papers), and consists of a thorough theoretical discussion, an introduction to methodological issues, and an overarching narrative which links the studies around a central theme. At least some of the papers should preferably be published in well-known scientific journals or conference proceedings.

The doctoral student is guaranteed supervision by two supervisors. Exceptions may be considered based on the needs of the individual doctoral student. One supervisor has the role of main supervisor. The main supervisor is tasked with all formal responsibilities, and is usually affiliated with the department where the doctoral studies have been conducted.

### Part one: The public defence seminar

The main actors in the public defence are the candidate, the external reviewer appointed by the faculty, the examining committee, and the chair. The seminar is public and the size of the audience is unpredictable. It may be around 50 people, but it could also be less. The audience is typically mixed, ranging from friends and relatives of the candidate to fellow researchers. Part of the audience usually consists of people who are not familiar with the academic vocabulary; it is therefore desirable that at least some parts of the defence act are understandable for the whole audience.

*The external reviewer* is a professor or an associate professor from a national or international university. The external reviewer is an expert in the specific field of the thesis, and should not have formal professional relations/connections with the candidate. The external reviewer does not vote in the formal decision meeting following the public defence. The main task of the external reviewer is to give the examining committee supplementary information for their evaluation. The evaluation of the thesis presented by the external reviewer should however be given weight in the examining committee’s judgement. The answers provided by the doctoral student during the defence should also be part of the overall judgement.

*The chair* is a professor or associate professor from the department and is sometimes the supervisor. The chair opens the session by presenting the participants in the defence act and provides the candidate with the opportunity to make any necessary clarifications, such as errata. This takes only a few minutes. The defence starts with a summary of the thesis, given by either the external reviewer or the candidate. The purpose of this is to establish that the main points of the thesis have been correctly understood, and to give the audience a better idea of the overall content and findings of the thesis. The summary usually takes around 20 minutes. If the summary is given by the external reviewer, they should ask the candidate whether he/she finds the summary adequate and fair.

If there are no misunderstandings that need to be sorted out, the external reviewer then poses questions to the candidate and invites them to discuss both theoretical and methodological issues in the thesis as a whole, as well as in each scientific paper (for compilation theses). The external reviewer systematically discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the thesis on all levels of detail. This part is typically carried out in 'Questions and Answers' interaction with the respondent. It is preferable that this entails a critical dialogue with a positive tone between the external reviewer and the candidate. This part usually takes 70- 80 minutes.

When the external reviewer is done, the examining committee will usually pose questions that have not been addressed in the discussion thus far. It is normal for each committee member to ask one or two questions, but more questions are possible, and this is not seen as an indication of low thesis quality.

Finally the chair opens the floor for the audience to ask questions. The entire defence act normally takes around 2 hours, but it may last longer. The chair closes the session after the questions from the audience have been answered. The chair cannot close the defence until all parties are satisfied with the questioning.

The implication of the act as a "public defence" is two-fold. First and foremost, it means that this is an opportunity for the general public to be informed about "latest news" from academia. Second, it means that anyone has the right to oppose the thesis. This is called "extra opposition". This is, however, something that seldom occurs.

### **Part two: The committee's meeting**

The examining committee is appointed by the faculty and generally consists of three members. Members of the committee should not have had collaboration (such as common publications) either with the supervisors nor the candidate during the last 5-7 years.

The examining committee withdraws for a closed deliberation meeting (20-45 minutes). The external reviewer and the supervisor(s) are expected to attend the meeting in order to answer questions from the committee, but do not take part in the decision-making. That said, the external reviewer is allowed to make his/her opinion about the quality of the thesis clear at any moment during the public defence. The examining committee decides among themselves who is to be the chair of the meeting. The thesis is judged 'pass' or 'fail' by a common decision from all committee members.

### **Other comments**

The external reviewer and the examining committee should receive an electronic copy of the final version of the thesis three weeks before the public defence seminar, with a printed version mailed out shortly thereafter. During this period, the thesis should also be available for public inspection. If the external reviewer or one of the members of the examining committee finds that the thesis does not meet the standard required for a doctoral degree, they are expected to contact the supervisor or the examiner well in advance to give the respondent the opportunity to withdraw the thesis.

The setting of the defence is rather informal as both family members and friends of the candidate are present. Hence, the tone (but not the academic level) of the discussion is usually attuned accordingly. It is not recommended that the respondent and the external reviewer have close contact, such as joint lunch, dinner or other activities, before the defence. However, it is not a problem if the two meet for a shorter informal meeting to introduce themselves. This can help make the defence sharper, calmer and more enjoyable for the audience.