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Information for the Examination Committee and the Opponent

Regarding the Public Defence for the PhD degree
at the Faculty of Science and Technology

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The Public Defence - Procedure and Regulations

Doctoral theses at Swedish universities are presented orally in a public defence (public debate or “disputation”) where the student, known as the Respondent, should defend his/her scientific work. In this document, the procedure and regulations of the defence are presented. The document can be seen as a complement to *Föreskrifter om disputation och betygsnämnd samt licentiatseminarium (TEKNAT 2011/177)*.

The Examination / Assessment Committee

The grade (pass or fail) for a Ph D is decided by an Examination Committee (*betygsnämnd*) which is individually selected for every examination. The defence is an examination and not solely a formality. Although rare, it does happen that a committee fails to reach a positive decision.

The Examination Committee members read the thesis prior to the public defence, listen and judge the defence, and are after the defence given the opportunity to ask questions in addition to those asked by the Opponent. After the defence, the Examination Committee together with the Opponent and the Respondent’s supervisors retire to a non-public meeting to discuss the student’s contribution in the thesis and in the oral discussions with the Opponent. The committee selects a chair person internally and if necessary the committee members may invite other parties to participate in the discussions. Supervisors have the right to be present during the Committee’s discussions, but not in the decision or in the final discussions prior to the decision. There are no grades other than “passed” or ”failed”, which should be based on the content and the defence of the thesis. Decision is made by majority vote within the committee alone.

It is important for each committee member to be aware of that the committee has an important and formally regulated role. It is not, for example, acceptable for the committee to fail to reach a decision (although in very exceptional cases a committee meeting may be adjourned). According to the faculty’s current regulation, appointed committee substitutes not required for a full committee should not participate in the committee meeting.

Apart from their decision, the committee should not document their work. It is not, for example, required that committee members provide written comments on the thesis, neither before nor after the public defence. However, a member of the committee can document a dissenting opinion in the decision protocol.

The Opponent

The main role of the Opponent is to lead the public scientific discussion with critical questions to the Respondent, whereas the Examination Committee, in the closed meeting after the defence, decides on accepting the thesis. The Opponent is not a part of the Examination Committee, but has the right to attend the meeting. The Opponent is not allowed to be present during the committee’s final discussions or the subsequent decision. The defence concerns the thesis and related issues, and should not be an examination of the student’s basic knowledge based on courses. Such examinations have normally already been passed at this stage. Since the defence should be a scientific discussion at the highest possible level, one should not adjust the level of the discussion to the public audience nor by asking questions on more basic knowledge.

The opposition should preferably provide the Examination Committee with answers to the following questions:

- Is the problem studied relevant?
- Have appropriate methods been used?
- Are the results satisfactorily presented?
- Are there adequate and correct references to the literature?
- Do the results presented justify the conclusions drawn?
- Is the specific contribution of the Respondent clear?

If the Opponent wishes to round up his/her opposition giving an overall judgement of the thesis, he/she may do so in general terms, but should not say or imply that the Respondent has "passed", this is the decision of the Examination Committee.

The Thesis

The thesis may be a monograph, but more often it is a collection of scientific articles together with an introduction that places the articles in the context of the research field and also summarizes them. Apart from published articles, the thesis may contain unpublished manuscripts. Where a thesis contains articles with more than one author, it is important for the Examination Committee to assess to what extent the work can be attributed to the Respondent.

The Public Defence

The Faculty has appointed a Chair, an Opponent and an Examination Committee for the session. The normal procedure at the defence is the following:

The Chair, usually a professor in the research field (the Supervisor of the Respondent or another person, appointed by the section dean), opens the official proceedings. If the Opponent, the Respondent or others are not Swedish speaking the defence will be conducted either entirely or partially in English. The chair decides how the defence will proceed, and praxis varies within the Faculty. A common arrangement is:

The Respondent is first permitted to give additional information about the thesis, such as errata, or reporting recent acceptance/publication of papers in the thesis. Then, the thesis topic and the thesis are presented orally by the Opponent and/or the Respondent. An example: The Opponent gives a short (10-15 min) introduction and background to the topic of the thesis, preferably at a level understandable for non-specialists since the defence is a public event. If agreed upon in advance, this presentation may also be given by the Respondent. Next, the Respondent (or the Opponent) presents a short summary of the thesis, describing its main methods and results (commonly around 30 min). This presentation should be aimed at an audience reasonably acquainted with the research field, or at least with a broad scientific education. Thereafter follows the opposition during which the Opponent examines the thesis and asks questions to the Respondent, who should defend the thesis and engage in a scientific discussion with the Opponent. Finally, the Examination Committee and the audience are given the opportunity to ask additional questions. The whole procedure commonly takes 2 to 3 hours, but there are no formal limits on minimum or maximum time, so the time needed for a proper scientific discussion should be taken.

If problems should arise

The public defence should be regarded as the examination based upon the written work in the thesis. It is not the intention that the committee members have made individual decisions regarding the Respondent before the public defence. Prior to the defence any potential problems should be addressed to the Respondent's department, usually by contacting the main supervisor. Problems may concern e.g. the quality of the thesis, indications of possible plagiarism, or issues regarding to what extent the work can be attributed to the student as opposed to co-authors of articles. In some cases, it may be necessary to postpone or cancel the defence.

Should questions of a formal character appear during the defence or the committee's subsequent meeting, the committee chair should contact 1) the section dean, 2) the faculty office (phone numbers can be found on the form concerning selecting opponent and committee), and 3) the chair of the faculty's postgraduate board of studies.

Formal Information and Guidelines

Information on Third-Cycle (doctoral) studies in Sweden can be found at <http://www.doktorandhandboken.nu/english>

Guidelines for Third-Cycle Education at Uppsala University can be found at <http://regler.uu.se/>.

Föreskrifter om disputation och betygsnämnd samt licentiatseminarium can be found at http://www.teknat.uu.se/Doktorand/Regler_och_riktlinjer_for_utbildning_forskarniva/