

The public defence of doctoral theses at Örebro University – information for faculty examiners, members of the examining committee and the chair at the public defence

You have been invited to take part in the public defence of a doctoral thesis at Örebro University, Sweden, and this document serves as an introduction to this event, the procedures and people involved.

Introduction

In Sweden, the public defence of a doctoral thesis is an academic event and normally the last port of call for the doctoral student. If successful in this final examination, as well as in the other parts of the programme, the student will be awarded the doctoral degree. The defence takes the form of a public discussion between the faculty examiner and the author of the thesis.

The thesis, which is the object of the examination, is the result of a four-year doctoral programme consisting of supervised research and advanced course-based studies. The thesis may be a monograph or a compilation thesis consisting of several constituent papers.

As the defence is a public event, the audience normally consists of colleagues, researchers, students, friends and family of the author.

Participants

Faculty examiner (Sw. *opponent*) – the person appointed to review and publicly discuss the doctoral thesis. The task of the faculty examiner is to review the research work, not to examine or test the author's knowledge.

Doctoral student/author of the thesis (Sw. *doktorand/respondent*) – the doctoral student defending the thesis.

Chair of the defence (Sw. *disputationsordförande*) – the moderator of the public defence event, responsible for opening and closing the event.

Supervisor (Principal) (Sw. *handledare [huvud-]*)

Examining committee (Sw. *betygsnämnd*) – consists of three to five persons appointed by Örebro University. Their duty is to determine whether the oral presentation and the defence, in addition to the written thesis, are of a satisfactory scholarly standard. The examining committee determines the grade, either pass or fail, by voting.

Chair of the examining committee (Sw. *betygsnämndens ordförande*) – one of the members of the examining committee is appointed to chair the meeting.

Before the public defence

The thesis is normally sent to the faculty examiner, the members of the examining committee and the chair of the defence approximately three weeks before the day of the public defence. The faculty examiner may if he or she so wishes contact the author to obtain the thesis in advance (e.g. as proof copy), or to access any source material or original data on which the thesis is based.

The public defence procedure

The public defence of doctoral theses at Örebro University normally follows a certain procedure. Within some disciplines however, alternative procedures may apply.

- The chair of the defence opens the event and extends a welcome to those attending. The author of the thesis, the thesis title, the faculty examiner and the members of the examining committee are then introduced. The chair also accounts for the sequence of events during the defence.
- The author of the thesis is given the opportunity to account for, and comment on, any corrections to and misprints in the thesis.
- Within the humanities and social sciences disciplines: the faculty examiner is normally called upon to offer a summary (max. 30 min.) of the content of the thesis. After the author has been given the opportunity to respond, a discussion opens between the two in which the faculty examiner presents any queries and comments concerning method and findings. The author of the thesis is expected to give clear answers to the faculty examiner's questions.
- Within the medical, science and technology disciplines: the author normally opens with a presentation of his/her thesis¹. Then a discussion opens between the faculty examiner and the author in which the faculty examiner presents any queries and comments concerning method and findings. The author of the thesis is expected to give clear answers to the faculty examiner's questions.
- The debate is then opened up and the members of the examining committee and the audience may ask questions. The chair determines the order of speakers. The author of the thesis shall be given the opportunity to respond to every contribution to the discussion.
- The chair thanks all those taking part and declares the public defence closed.

Immediately after the public defence, the examining committee convenes and determines the grade.

Duties of the faculty examiner

Before the public defence

- The faculty examiner shall critically review the entire thesis and prepare his/her public discussion contributions.

¹ Within medicine, the faculty examiner normally offers a summarised presentation of the subject field of the thesis before the author gives his/her presentation.

- The faculty examiner is obliged to report any suspicion of research misconduct to the Records Office (*Registrator*) at Örebro University.
- The faculty examiner is obliged to report any circumstances that could constitute their disqualification as faculty examiner. See information on conflicts of interest and disqualification in Appendix 1.

During the public defence

- The faculty examiner shall, in addition to the duties mentioned above, critically discuss the thesis, emphasising core findings and discussing its content with the author.

Duties of the examining committee

Before the public defence

- The members of the examining committee are obliged to report any suspicion of research misconduct to the Records Office (*Registrator*) at Örebro University; and
- The members of the examining committee are obliged to report any circumstances that could constitute their disqualification as members of the examining committee. See information on conflicts of interest and disqualification in Appendix 1.

During the public defence

- The members of the examining committee shall, once the debate has been declared open by the faculty examiner, ask the author questions of critical nature. The questions shall primarily address areas and aspects which were not discussed by the faculty examiner.

After the public defence

- The members of the examining committee convene and appoint a chair (please note that this should be one of the three to five committee members). The examining committee meeting shall be held in two parts. *The first part* is intended as an opportunity for the examining committee to obtain information from the faculty examiner and supervisors. *The second part* is reserved for the members of the examining committee to facilitate their discussion, consideration and decision on the matter. The faculty examiner and all supervisors are entitled to attend the meeting and express their opinion, however, only during the first part of the meeting.

In relation to the dissertation the members of the examining committee receive information about the rules concerning the examining committee meeting, along with the examining committee meeting protocol that is to be used.

For those who want to read the protocol template before the defence, it is available on the following web page: <https://www.oru.se/english/study/doctoral-education/doctoral-student/public-defence-of-doctoral-thesis-and-diploma/>

- The examining committee shall determine the grade of the thesis through a majority decision. When determining the grade, the content of the thesis, as well as the author's defence of the thesis, shall be considered. Either of the grades pass or fail shall be used.

When the grade given is 'pass', it is up to the examining committee to determine whether or not a justification is given. When the grade given is 'fail', the decision must include a clear justification for the decision, in accordance with Section 32 of the Administrative Procedure Act (2017:900). If a member of the examining committee wishes to enter a reservation against the decision, they may ask that a note is made of this in the minutes or in an appendix.

- The protocol template form provided for the examining committee meeting is filled in, signed and handed over to the chair of the defence. The grade is normally announced directly following the committee meeting.

Duties of the chair of the defence

In connection with the public defence

- the chair of the defence is the moderator of the public defence event;
- the chair of the defence shall make sure that the procedures put in place for the public defence are complied with. He or she shall also make sure that everyone is present when the public defence begins. In the event that the faculty examiner or a member of the examining committee is absent, the chair of the defence shall postpone the public defence to later that same day and shall, if required, him/herself make sure that the necessary measures and decisions are taken.

Absence due to emergency

In the event that a substitute is needed urgently, the chair of the defence shall him/herself, or via the subject coordinator or a professor/teacher within the subject, contact the officer in charge at the Executive and Faculty Office. The Executive and Faculty Office offers the following support:

- Ensuring that the Higher Education Ordinance and the local regulations, and Örebro University's guidelines, are complied with in the appointment of a substitute.
- Assisting in the administration of a new decision by faculty management.

Decisions relating to substitutes shall be made by the dean or deputy dean. This is the case even in the event that the substitute named in the Proposal for Public Defence of Doctoral Thesis is to be called in. If the officer in charge is unavailable, another officer, or the head of the Executive and Faculty Office shall be contacted. If this is not possible, or if time is short, the chair of the defence or other person from within the subject shall him/herself contact the dean or deputy dean via telephone. Decisions communicated orally by the dean shall later be recorded in writing.

If the public defence is held by means of video link and the call is disconnected during the public defence, an audio-only telephone conference call may be used as a complement, if it is the view of the *chair of the public defence* that the public defence thereby can be concluded without it being a disadvantage to the doctoral student². Otherwise, the *chair* shall postpone the public defence to

² For example, the public defence is nearly concluded or it is not to the student's disadvantage, for any other reasons, that the remaining part of the public defence is carried out by means of an audio-only telephone conference call.

later that same day pending the necessary measures and decisions. This provision also applies if communication cannot be established at all at the beginning of the public defence.

After the public defence

- the chair of the defence shall normally ensure that the examining committee and the faculty examiner convene to discuss and determine the grade. He or she will also provide a form for the minutes of that meeting; and
- the chair of the defence shall normally check that all necessary details from the examining committee's meeting have been entered in the minutes.

Remote participation

The aim is that all those with an assigned role at a public defence should, whenever possible, attend in person and on site at the time of the public defence. However, long travel distances can be associated with challenges, both from an environmental and a time perspective. Therefore, there is a possibility for the faculty examiner and for members of the examining committee to take part remotely, but at least one of the examining committee members (it is suggested that this is the chair of the examination committee) should be present on site. This is to ensure that any practical questions relating to the examining committee's meeting are dealt with and to facilitate the process.

The author of the thesis is expected to be present in person and on site at the time of the defence, unless there are exceptional circumstances preventing them from being so.

The chair of the defence must be present on site throughout the defence.

General information

Questions concerning the procedure of or the venue for the defence should be addressed to the chair of the defence or to the doctoral student's principal supervisor. Please notify your contact at Örebro University of any requirements of a practical nature or regarding technical equipment, e.g. overhead projector, computer, data projector, well in advance.

No formal dress is required. Should your university use academic dress you are welcome to wear it, otherwise it is common for the faculty examiner and the members of the examining committee to wear a suit.

Please do not hesitate to contact the chair of the defence with queries regarding the procedures for or the arrangements surrounding the event. The information in this document describes the public defence as it is normally conducted at Örebro University, but there are variants. If you are uncertain of the defence procedure within your subject area, please consult the chair of the defence or the principal supervisor.

Appendix 1: Conflicts of interest and disqualification

A conflict of interest is a circumstance that may negatively affect confidence in a particular person's neutrality at, in this case, the public defence and examination of a doctoral thesis. The person then has an interest in the case that could influence his or her standpoint. In other words, it is about circumstances that could *typically* lead to a person dealing with a case in a biased manner. However, this does not necessarily entail that the person *is* actually biased. Even so, a conflict of interest does disqualify a person from being involved in the case at hand. Conflicts of interest and disqualification shall however be disregarded where the question of impartiality is obviously of no importance.

Following from the above, the persons appointed as faculty examiners, members of the examining committee or chair of the public defence may be disqualified to perform their respective duties primarily as a result of their relation to the doctoral student or to family members or others closely related to the doctoral student, but also due to their relation to e.g. the supervisor or other member of the examining committee. In the event of a conflict of interest, someone else shall be put forward for and appointed to perform the duties in question.

Examples of circumstances that may constitute grounds for disqualification in connection with a public defence are primarily relationships or family ties, extraordinary advantage or detriment from the outcome of the examination, obvious friendship or enmity, close professional cooperation, or a state of dependence, for instance financial or in the workplace (supervisor-employee).

Extract from the Administrative Procedures Act concerning disqualification (2017:900)

Section 16

A person who takes part on behalf of an authority in the processing of a matter in a way that can influence the authority's decision in the matter is disqualified if:

1. either they or a person close to them is a party in the matter or can otherwise be assumed to be affected by the decision to a not insignificant extent;
2. either they or a person close to them is or has been a representative or counsel for a party in the matter or someone else who can be assumed to be affected by the decision to a not insignificant extent;
3. they participated in the final processing of the matter at another authority and have, as a result of this, already taken a position on the questions to be examined by the authority as a superior instance; or
4. there is some other special circumstance that means that their impartiality in the matter can be questioned.

If it is obvious that the question of impartiality is of no importance, the authority shall disregard the disqualification.

Section 17

A person who is disqualified must not take part in the processing of the matter and must not be present when the matter is determined either. However, they may perform tasks that no one else can perform without a considerable delay in the processing of the matter.

Section 18

A person who is aware of a circumstance that can be assumed to disqualify them must immediately notify the authority of this.

An authority shall examine a question of disqualification as soon as possible.

The person that the disqualification applies to may only take part in the examination of the question of disqualification if this is required for the authority to be quorate and a replacement cannot be summoned without material delay to the examination.