Instructions to the Opponent – A Guide to the Procedure for the Public Defence of a Doctoral Thesis at the Sahlgrenska Academy

Background

The Ph. D. Programme corresponds to the third cycle of the Bologna framework, and is preceded by four years of study in the first and second cycles (Bachelor and Master levels). The doctoral studies comprise four years of full-time study or five to eight years of part-time study. The Ph. D. programme combines graduate courses with an individual research programme leading to publishable results. The research programme culminates in the submission of a thesis that is defended in public. The thesis defence is a formal event for which the procedure is outlined below.

The thesis

The thesis may be presented either as a monograph, or (more commonly) as published papers preceded by a summary. In the latter case, the summary and the published papers are given equal weight in the assessment of the thesis.

The participants at the public thesis defence

The opponent is a researcher selected to discuss the thesis at the public defence and act as the main examiner of the thesis.
The candidate is the author of the thesis.
The chairman is usually a professor from the candidate’s department whose role is to oversee the process of the thesis defence.
The examination committee is appointed by the faculty and consists of three or five members. At least one of the committee members is from another university or research institute. The opponent and the candidate’s main supervisor are invited to attend the examination board meeting (see below).

The audience
A Swedish thesis defence is a public event. The audience typically comprises co-workers of the candidate and other scientists with an interest in the research field along with friends and relatives of the candidate.

Sequence of events

An approximate time schedule for the defence is as follows. Typically 3 hours are allowed for the entire thesis defence procedure.

- Chairman’s introduction (4-5 min.)
- Candidate’s opening remarks (2-3 min.)
- Opponent’s overview of the research area (approximately 10-20 min.)
- Candidate’s summary of the thesis (20-30 min.)
- Opponent’s questions to the candidate (until the opponent is satisfied, typically 60-75 min.)
- Questions from the examination board (10-20 min.)
- Question from the audience (0-10 min.)
- Examination board meeting (15-30 min.)

Chairman’s introduction
The chairman opens the proceedings and introduces the opponent, the candidate and the examination board.

Candidate’s opening remarks
The candidate is given an opportunity to account for errata.

The opponent’s overview of the research area
sets the scene for the discussion. It is appropriate to provide a brief overview of the research area of the thesis, and to integrate the thesis work in a wider context. The overview should be kept at a rather simple level due to the mixed audience.

The candidate’s summary of the thesis
should highlight the methods and main results from each part of the thesis. It allows the candidate to demonstrate what he/she has achieved before the discussion of the thesis.

Alternatively (albeit less commonly) the opponent may present the summary of the thesis instead of the candidate. If so, the candidate is given an opportunity to briefly comment on the opponent’s summary. The opponent and the candidate’s supervisor are expected to agree on who shall present this summary in due time before the defence.

Opponent’s questions to the candidate
is the most important part of the procedure. The opponent is expected to focus on the scientific principles and concepts applied and on the wider significance of the thesis work, but also to examine selected aspects of the scientific work of the thesis. Questions related to other parts of the discipline or adjacent subjects not included in the thesis are not normally raised, but it should be emphasized that the opponent may ask whichever questions he or she finds appropriate. The opponent decides when this part of the defence is concluded.

Questions from the board and the audience
After the opponent’s questions the chairman invites questions to the candidate from the examination committee and, after the committee is satisfied,
the audience is given the chance to ask questions. Committee members typically ask a few questions each.

**Closure of the public session.** When the discussion is finished, the chairman formally closes the session and the members of the examination committee withdraw for their meeting.

**The examination committee meeting** is held behind closed doors. The board discusses the work presented in the thesis, its quality and significance, and comments on the candidate’s defence. The board finally votes on whether the thesis is considered sufficient for the Ph. D. degree or not. No grading of the thesis work occurs, and no written statement is provided. Although the opponent does not have a vote, his or her opinion is considered an important contribution to the board’s discussion.

Swedish theses are very rarely rejected after the formal defence. The content of the thesis is been reviewed internally prior to the defence and also externally in the case of published papers. Also, a pre-examination control performed by members of the examination committee precedes the public defence. The board thus has the opportunity to postpone or call off the defence should they question the quality of the work.

**Practical details**

You can expect to receive all the material in the thesis in manuscript or preprint form at least three weeks before the public defence. The final bound version of the thesis book will most likely arrive a little later. If you would like figures in the thesis for use in your opposition please contact the supervisor.

You will receive a fee for your work, and travel and subsistence expenses will be reimbursed. The candidate’s supervisor is typically the contact person for arranging your travel and hotel accommodation according to your preferences.

Although there is no formal dress code for the defence procedure, it is an important event that warrants appropriate attire.

**Dinner**

A dinner (banquet), hosted by the candidate, is held in the evening after the defence to celebrate the event or, occasionally, a few days later. You will be invited to this event by the candidate. The candidate’s friends, family and work colleagues also typically attend. It is highly valued if you can attend the dinner, and if so, it is customary to say a few words about the candidate, the thesis or the defence.