

# The Experience of ‘Defending’ the Doctoral Dissertation

International Comparative Studies of the  
Final Oral Examination

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Edited by Michael Byram and  
Maria Stoicheva

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## Chapter 3 Formats and scripts of the defence

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### 3 Formats and scripts of the defence

*Nikolina Tsvetkova, Maria Helena Araújo e Sá,  
and Branimir Stanimirov*

#### Introduction

The doctoral degree has become among the most researched areas in higher education. Some of this body of work explores aspects of the defence (often referred to as ‘viva’) such as institutional settings, the experience of examiners (Byram & Stoicheva, 2022), and their expectations of the candidates’ performance (Tan, 2022). While having differing views, aims, procedures, and results (Poole, 2015), authors agree that the main purpose of the viva is for the candidate to answer in a satisfactory way the examiners’ questions (Watts, 2012; Tan, 2022), but see Chapter 2 of this book for other views. Some recent studies find that the format of the viva matters and has a measurable impact on the defending candidates’ perception of the event, and that the defence is usually a positive experience for them (Lantsoght, 2021). Wisker et al. (2022), for instance, examine online defences and the advantages and disadvantages of this format, for example, examination rigour, comfort, and anxiety. Other accounts question the British ‘closed-door PhD and doctoral viva voce’ by analysing examiners’ positional power, fairness of the examination, and the candidate’s psychological state during the event (Stephenson et al., 2023; Taylor, 2023). The literature also deals with post-defence reports and depicts them as ‘a semiotic configuration underpinned by subjective and collective representations’ (Dardy et al., 2002, n.p.).

Another strand of analysis deals with the type of questions asked, and the extent to which a defence is formal or informal, or a ritualistic event of a celebratory character (Swales, 2012; Charlton & Smith, 2022; Nir & Bogler, 2021; Wagner et al., 2022).

Institutional policies, principles related to a PhD examination and the different conceptualizations of a doctorate in various universities have also attracted researchers’ attention. Tinkler and Jackson (2000) compared assessment practices and argued that there are many ways to implement scripts and formats. Lovat et al. (2022) analyse the usefulness of defences and explore their potential as a ‘feedback mechanism in doctoral development and examination’ and deal with post-defence discussions among examiners and their experience of the examination process.

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This chapter focuses on the different 'formats' of PhD defence and the accompanying 'scripts' (specific normative requirements and deviations from them) as they are revealed in the 11 cases in this book. The following sections follow the structure of the case study chapters and outline features of formats and scripts before, during, and after the defence. The comparative analysis seeks to establish commonalities and variations in the way defences proceed and how this affects the experiences of the participants.

## **Before the defence**

### *Admission to defence – requirements and procedures*

Generally, there is similarity in the length of doctoral studies (three to four years) except for Connecticut where this period can be up to eight years.

In order to admit PhD candidates to defend their thesis, there are certain procedures attesting to the quality of their work and their meeting the requirements, and the defence may be preceded by a preliminary assessment or discussion.

The number of documents candidates submit for the defence varies but, in many cases, candidates have to report on their activities as doctoral students, for example, courses and examinations taken and papers published. In some cases, there are a required number of credits, accumulated by participating in courses and training activities. In others, completion of courses or 'induction programmes' is not tied to a stipulated number of credits. In a third group, the emphasis is on presenting a completed thesis, and there is no mention of any other activities prior to the defence. In the majority of the European cases, the required number of ECTS credits<sup>1</sup> is 180; in the German cases, there is no reference to the credit system.

It is interesting to examine who, officially, makes the decision at this stage. There is variation across the cases: from the supervisor as a key figure, through a special committee, to the candidate deciding with or without the supervisor whether they are ready for defence. However, in practice, our cases reveal an ongoing process of negotiation between supervisor(s) and candidate as to whether the work is ready for assessment.

Requirements regarding thesis length vary across cases. However, regardless of the concrete word/page limit, the thesis is expected to be of a substantial volume. Only in the Southern Denmark case does the candidate submit a 'compilation/anthology' consisting of between three and six articles and a summarizing account, although other cases also have this option in principle and it is becoming more frequent.

### *Reviews/Assessments*

Procedures for assessing the thesis before admission to defence range from whether there is a review committee which gives a grade or makes a

recommendation, through the use of formal criteria, the extent to which pre-defence reviews are public, to the time between submission and providing the reviews.<sup>2</sup>

Formal written reviews are prepared in Trieste, Augsburg, Saarland, Versailles, Durham, and Beijing, following strict requirements about the number of reviewers and their affiliation. The role of the reviews is to state if the thesis is ready for defence and/or if there is a need to make any corrections prior to the final submission.

Pre-defence assessment of the thesis may be performed by a committee which has known the research since the proposal (Connecticut and Primorska) or a group convened at departmental level, including external members, with the department council making the final decision (Sofia). Where there are no formal pre-defence assessment criteria, the reviewers look for mastery of research methodologies, familiarity with the relevant body of scientific literature and contribution to the research done in the particular sphere. As said in the Durham chapter, 'the keywords are therefore originality, rigour and significance'. At Beijing, apart from the merits of the thesis, the candidate's political, ideological, and moral integrity are also appraised.

#### *Sharing information about the assessment*

The time allocated for writing and submitting reviews and to what extent they are made public varies. For instance, at Augsburg, the candidate is allowed to see the reports of the examiners before the defence and, after it is accepted, the thesis itself is publicly accessible. At Beijing, both the supervisor and the candidate have access to the review reports (though reviewers' names are kept from the candidate). At Versailles, the reports are passed to the committee and to the doctoral candidate, and the thesis abstract is disseminated within the institution before the defence.

Access to reviews may be beneficial for candidates. At Sofia, the candidate considered the comments very precise and detailed, and recommendations from colleagues 'understanding' and 'benevolent'. One of the Trieste candidates said he had positive feelings because the report was good and written by an important expert in the field, thus giving him a boost in confidence.

The above discussed pre-defence formats and scripts are summarized in the Table 3.1.

#### **During the defence**

Despite being strongly conditioned by an institutional regulatory framework, the doctoral defence is first and foremost a communicative event, co-constructed by the participants in the spaces and times in which it takes place. In this section, we analyse this event, focusing on two interconnected topics: the organization of the key communicative features and the atmosphere of communication.

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Table 3.1 Pre-defence procedures ↵

	<i>Aveiro</i>	<i>Versailles</i>	<i>Sofia</i>	<i>Trieste</i>	<i>Durham</i>
Required training and coursework	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Role of supervisor	Provides a report	Recommends defence	Assesses readiness of the thesis	Gives an opinion about admitting the thesis for a pre-defence	Gives an informal opinion about readiness for defence
Pre-defence assessment and reviews	A prior meeting of the jury to decide whether a thesis is ready	Yes	Discussion at the department	Yes	Yes
Thesis length	Not specified	400 pages	Depends on department requirements	Not specified	100,000 words
Formalized assessment criteria	No	No	No	No	Yes
Grades vs. formative assessment	No	Formative	Formative	Opinion on admission to or postponement of defence	Opinion according to the set criteria
Time for assessment by examiners	30 days	At least 14 days	N/A	30 days	3 months
Pre-defence assessment results	Shared with the jury	Shared with the jury and the candidate	N/A	Shared with the candidate	Confidential

<i>Southern Denmark</i>	<i>Connecticut</i>	<i>Primorska</i>	<i>Augsburg</i>	<i>Saarland</i>	<i>BLCU</i>
Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Confirms activities are done	Participates in approving thesis submission	May assess readiness of the thesis	Part of the committee evaluating the thesis	Negotiates readiness for submission with candidate	Approves thesis submission for pre-defence evaluation
Examiners' report	Prospectus Committee	Yes	Yes	Examiners' reports	Yes
Monograph of 250 pages Compilation – 120–250 pages	Not specified	300 or more pages	Not specified	Not specified	100,000 words
No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
No	Feedback	Opinion: 'suitable for defence', 'to be modified' or 'rejected'	Grade on a 4-grade scale	Grade on a 4-grade scale	Grade on a 100-point scale; and deemed suitable for defence by at least three of five reviewers
3 months	Minimum of 10 days	45 days	14 working days	3 months	None specified but 2 weeks by custom
Shared with candidate	Shared with candidate	Sent to the university senate	PhD can see them	Shared with faculty member first and then with PhD	Shared with candidate and defence committee (reviewers kept anonymous)

*The key communicative features*

Variability in terms of the composition of the examining committees, the role of the supervisor and the presence and roles of the audience is reflected in the way communication takes place (e.g. who speaks to whom, for how long, about what, or who moderates). The organization of space is crucial. It relates to what the event means to a specific community, and to characteristics of academic relationships (e.g. degree of hierarchy, codes of conduct, roles of the participants).

Analysis of the cases reveals variability in the space where the defence takes place. Rooms, specifically arranged (through objects and arrangements that give them dignity and solemnity; e.g. at Beijing, a long red banner with the words 'Beijing Language Culture University Doctoral Student Oral Defence' hangs across the room, at Primorska the table is covered and small flags and flowers placed on it), contrast with undifferentiated rooms, evidently used for classes and seminars. Some of the latter are considered inadequate for purpose, as they generate discomfort in the participants and hinder interaction. For instance, at Trieste and Sofia, the room seems to have an unsettling effect on the candidates.

The visual representation of the space and its organization reveals the following:

- the room as the stage for the candidate: this format highlights the candidate as the main actor, isolating him or her from the other participants; the candidate sits or stands opposite examiners and the audience with space between; everyone sees the candidate and he or she sees everyone in the room; the examiners often occupy the first row of seats, in front of the audience, which emphasizes their role as privileged interlocutors (e.g. Primorska, Saarland, Sofia, Southern Denmark); in Connecticut, the jury sits next to the audience;
- the room as the stage for the defence, featuring all the main actors (candidate and examiners); the edge of the stage is where the other participants sit facing the presenter, as in a concert (e.g. Aveiro, Versailles). On this stage, which reinforces the solemnity of the event and marks the positionality of the participants, the relative positions of the examiners and the candidate may vary. In some cases (e.g. Aveiro and Versailles), the candidate is separated from the examiners by a few metres; at Beijing, they sit at the same table, albeit in different positions;
- the room as the examining committee's stage: this format is equivalent to the first, but this time it is the committee at the front, facing the candidate and the audience. The candidate sits in the front row, with their back to the audience and facing the committee, a format found only at Trieste, perhaps related to the fact that two candidates are examined in turn.<sup>3</sup>

Each arrangement is almost always fixed, and changes in the script or in the relative positions of the participants are rare. Even where there is a break

during the defence, the ‘actors’ reoccupy their positions when they return to the room, revealing recognition of the institutional dimension of this arrangement.

The distribution, regulation, and function of time is another key feature of communicative actions. The defence in our cases lasts from one to three hours. This fluctuation is not related to the above typology of the communicative stages and acts that constitute the defence, but rather to the duration of each act and who participates in it, which includes the time allocated to each participant. Table 3.2 summarizes these relationships:

*Table 3.2* Procedures during the defence ↵

<i>Sequence of acts</i>	<i>Main participants</i>	<i>Time (limits)</i>	<i>Observations</i>
Opening (introducing participants, the event and its rules)	Chairperson (may or may not be a member of Examining Committee) Monologic format	2’–5’	
Thesis presentation	Candidate Monologic format	10’–30’	Use of projection supports + written notes Variable communicative styles (except: Durham)
Discussion (appreciations; comments; questions/ answers; conversation; synthesis)	Examiners + candidate (perhaps: audience)	30’–2h 30’	High variability Occasional breaks
Decision (discussion; assessment; announcement)	Examiners (perhaps: secretary) (private meeting) Dialogic format	7’–30’	Exception in Sofia: immediate decision, no change of venue or participants, examiners vote by raising hands
Closure (announcement of the decision; oral and written protocols; thanks; praise; congratulations and greetings; possible celebration)	Chair (announcement) All participants	5’–indefinite	High variability

This table highlights the ritualization of acts of communication and their sequencing, as well as the internal variability of the format of two of them.

The discussion of the thesis is the central act of the defence, to which all participants attach special relevance. This phase is prepared in advance by candidates (often with the support of their supervisor(s)) and by the examiners. The audience follows this discussion carefully, in particular, not only the specialized public (other doctoral students, for example) but also family and friends.

As regards the format of participation and the degree of interactivity of the discussion, in some cases the candidate knows the questions in advance; in others, they are given a list of questions from all the members of the committee (this list may be complemented *in loco* by the audience, as in Primorska, Saarland, or Sofia). In some cases, the candidate is given time to prepare answers (e.g. Beijing, Primorska). However, in most cases, the candidate does not know the questions, and the discussion is organized in dyads (Examiner 1 – candidate; Examiner 2 – candidate, etc.), moderated by the chair. Interruptions may occur either on the part of the chair (to manage time or topic), within the dyad by the examiner (to clarify questions or topic focus), or by other examiners, who add points of view or sub-questions, thus broadening the participation. This makes the interaction less examination-like and more similar to an academic discussion among peers, although the typical question–answer format of an examination is maintained. Interruptions by the candidate are extremely rare, which reinforces the hierarchy of relationships. At the end, there may be moments of synthesis, outlined in advance by the chair or a reporting examiner and completed during the discussion.

Two cases differ because they do not foresee moments of interaction: Primorska (the candidate is provided with written questions, then is given 20 minutes to prepare the answers and 10 more minutes to respond); and Trieste, where all the members of the examining committee speak sequentially, then the candidate is given a few minutes at the end to react. These are also the two cases in which discussion is the shortest (about 30 and 50 minutes, respectively), with the average time being around 1h 30' (it can stretch to 2h 30').

The final act is also variable, reflecting the meaning the participants attach to it. Variations include

- the way of announcing the decision (it can be in private or in the presence of the entire audience);
- the communicative ritual (whether or not there are protocols to be read and signed, assessment forms to complete); these rituals can be experienced very emotionally as a 'rite of passage' to being a Doctor;
- the inclusion or absence of celebratory elements, like gifts, flowers, and speeches.

#### *Communication atmosphere*

The communication atmosphere is influenced by the arrangement of the features analysed above. This is an aspect of particular complexity and subtlety:

on the one hand, there are variations throughout and within the acts; on the other, there is a strong dependence on ritualized elements and on the participants' communicative styles and mastery of language usage.

The organization of the space influences the communication atmosphere, determining who sees whom and what, from where and at each moment of the procedure, and indicating the nature and purpose of the event, the relationships among the participants and the degree of formality expected. This organization is variable: informality of some spaces (where participants sit where they want, eat and drink, talk to each other, laugh and move around or take photos with flash during the speeches) and lack of attention to detail (presence of stacked chairs and tables and obsolete objects), contrasts with solemn spaces, strictly selected and arranged for the purpose.

Another element of formality is the dress code. In most cases, participants are dressed in more formal clothes, but in two universities (Aveiro and Versailles) the examining committee wear academic gowns, which surprised one Versailles examiner as being 'a little old-fashioned although it is important for the solemnity of the occasion'. Only in Sofia was a more informal dress code observed.

Given the 'examination-like atmosphere' of the defence, it is natural to expect a certain amount of tension. This tension is commented on by candidates in the post-defence interviews, where they highlight factors that contribute to reducing tension, including the rules governing behaviours, the characteristics of examiners, the kind of questions asked, and the nature of the audience.

The initial moments of the defence in particular – after the chair's formal opening statement – are characterized by tension which subsides during the presentation of the thesis, when candidates feel they have more control. During the discussion, candidates' confidence rises and falls, with moments of greater pressure, in which they are aware that they are being assessed on their answers. This manifests in hesitations, pauses, changes in the rate and pitch of the voice, eye contact, shakiness of voice, and confused formulations.

The examiners' use of language is important in tension management. Various stylistic resources are used: avoiding direct questions, lexical choices, modulating comments, supporting the formulation of answers, compliments, informal modes of address, using first names, expressions of pleasure and enthusiasm, inviting the candidate to select the questions they consider to be the most relevant, non-verbal cues of support, agreement and interest, and a flexible and spontaneous management of turn-taking. It is clear nonetheless that the interaction remains marked by the 'examination-oriented' nature of the event and, consequently, by the positionality of the interlocutors. The same two exceptions point to the need for further study: in Primorska and Trieste, where the discussions are shorter and have different formats, there are few moments of relaxation.

The tension is resolved in an almost cathartic celebration, after the committee's decision is announced (which is always positive and generally very complimentary, accentuating the ritualized nature of the defence). The final

stage is usually marked by manifestations of emotion in words and gestures and applause, which can extend beyond the time and space of the defence, in a festive atmosphere. Defence rituals can also be 'magical moments' (Sofia) and solemn (reading the oath at Versailles).

## **After the defence**

### *Post-examination discussion and report*

There is a post-defence discussion in all cases except Sofia where the Chair invites each committee member to state publicly their confirmation of the decision to award the doctorate. In other cases, there is variation in the degree of formality in the discussion and the outcome. The examiners confer in the absence of candidate and public and, in the majority of the cases, the discussions were not perceived as formal. In the Durham and Primorska cases, they were even characterized as 'collaborative', 'dialogic', and 'like a conversation'.

In most cases, the procedure involves writing a report whose function ceases with the official award of the degree; at Versailles, however, it will remain available on a national website. The report is prepared by the examiners, or by a secretary in their name. It may be read aloud before awarding the title after the post-examination discussion (Versailles, Southern Denmark), handed to the candidate (Augsburg, Saarland), or sent to the relevant authorities to process further before the official awarding of the degree (Beijing). In Augsburg, female candidates also have to state if they prefer feminine or masculine version of the title: Doktorin or Doktor.

### *Next steps*

Interviewees report three kinds of post-defence plan: further activities relating to post-defence procedures, plans for professional development, and continuing the relationships between supervisor and candidate.

Post-defence procedures in some cases involve revising the thesis according to the recommendations received and submitting a finalized text (e.g. Durham, Augsburg, Saarland, Connecticut) which may not require the formal agreement of the examiners (Beijing). Publishing the thesis through the university library or a publisher can also be a condition for awarding the degree as, for example, in Augsburg and Saarland.

Many candidates and supervisors said that they will remain in touch and some either plan to or have already started working on joint articles.

The majority of candidates contemplated entering academia after earning the degree and reports of thesis and defence may be very important (Versailles); in Southern Denmark, the candidate said she would not use it since it is a mixture of positive and critical comments and therefore not 'a typical recommendation letter'.

## Conclusion

The variability of formats and scripts observed in the 11 cases makes it difficult to conclude that there is a ‘typical’ defence, but we have seen that there are similarities and differences across cases, such as the significance of reports, of requirements of publication, and of the ‘staging’ of the defence. The analysis also suggests themes for further study, including the significance of prior knowledge of the reports and planned questions, the degree of formality of the event, the communication styles of examiners, the well-being of the candidate, the perceived purpose of the defence by institutions and participants, and the way this is reflected in codes and behaviours and, finally, the experience of rituals of passage from the status of non-doctor to doctor.

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## Notes

- 1 The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System allows students to transfer credit from one university and country to another within the European Education Area. One credit corresponds to 25–30 hours of work. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/da7467e6-8450-11e5-b8b7-01aa75ed71a1>
- 2 We do not focus here on how reviewers are selected and appointed, as this is dealt with Chapter 4, but try to establish the format of this preliminary assessment of theses.
- 3 In the Durham case, where the defence is not public, an analysis in terms of stage, actors, and audience is not appropriate.

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