

Guidelines for PhD assessments, Graduate School, Arts, Aarhus University

Contents

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0. Legal basis

The legal basis for the work of the assessment committee is the PhD Order of 27 August 2013 and the guidelines for the PhD degree programme issued by the Graduate School, Arts.

<http://fivu.dk/lovstof/gaeldende-love-og-regler/uddannelser/vejledning-ph-d-bekendtgorelsen.pdf>

http://phd.au.dk/fileadmin/grads.au.dk/AR/Generelle_retningslinjer_DK_1-11-2012.pdf

1. Purpose and target groups of assessment

The purpose of the work of the assessment committee is to ensure the impartial academic assessment of PhD dissertations, to issue a preliminary recommendation to the graduate school as to whether a defence should be conducted, to carry out the PhD defence, and then to issue a recommendation to the Academic Council as to whether the PhD degree should be awarded.

The preliminary recommendation constitutes the basis enabling the graduate school to decide between conducting a defence, or requiring that the dissertation should be resubmitted by a specified deadline, or appointing a new assessment committee. The preliminary recommendation also constitutes the basis of the author's preparation for the defence, and is normally used as the basis of the final recommendation.

The final recommendation constitutes the basis for the Academic Council's decision as to whether the PhD degree should be conferred. The assessment committee should be aware that in Denmark the final recommendation is normally enclosed with job applications – so it should be designed to give an impression of the performance of the person concerned during the PhD degree programme, as revealed in the PhD dissertation and during the defence.

2. Appointment of the assessment committee

With a view to complying with the deadlines for the assessment committee's recommendation (see section 18(1)) and conducting the defence (see section 20(2)), the composition of the assessment committee should be considered well in advance of the submission of the dissertation to ensure that the assessment committee has been appointed by the time the PhD dissertation is submitted. The principal supervisor must inform the PhD programme director of the upcoming submission of the dissertation at least two months prior to the expected submission date. If the expected submission date falls within the periods 15 June - 15 August or 15 December - 31 January, the PhD programme director must be informed at least three months prior to the expected submission date. Before the submission of the dissertation and after consultation with members of the research environment, including the principal supervisor, the PhD programme director will make recommendations to the graduate school concerning the composition of the assessment committee. These recommendations are subject to the approval of the head of the graduate school. The members of the PhD committee will be informed in writing of the proposals regarding the assessment committee, and have seven days to present any objections they may have about its composition. The PhD student or author (cf. section 15(2)) is entitled to submit any objections regarding the members of the assessment committee within a period of at least one week. If the PhD student or author cannot accept the final decision about the composition of the assessment committee, he or she may withdraw the dissertation within a period of one week.

In connection with the appointment of the assessment committee, a tentative date and time must be set for the defence to ensure that the members of the assessment committee, the principal supervisor and the author or PhD student can all be present at the time in question. This tentative date and time of the defence must be fixed with due consideration for the deadline in section 20(2): no more than three months after the submission of the dissertation.

The assessment committee consists of three members. The institution concerned appoints a chair from among the committee members. The members of the assessment committee must be recognised researchers within the relevant field. Two of the members must be external researchers, at least one of whom must be from outside Denmark, unless this is not relevant for the subject in question. Both sexes must be represented in the assessment committee. Supervisors may not be members of the assessment committee; however, the principal supervisor assists the assessment committee without voting rights.

3. Tasks of the assessment committee in connection with the preliminary recommendation

The tasks of the assessment committee are described in the PhD Order and section 18 of the appurtenant guidelines, and in points 6.3, 6.4, 7 and 7.1 of the guidelines for the PhD degree programme issued by the Graduate School, Arts. No later than two months after the submission of the PhD dissertation, the assessment committee must make its preliminary recommendation to the institution as to whether the PhD dissertation fulfils the requirements for the award of the PhD degree. The month of July is not included when calculating the two-month deadline. The reasons for the recommendation must be stated, and in the event of disagreement the majority will prevail. The recommendation must be prepared in accordance with the graduate school's guidelines on PhD assessments, cf. section 3.5 below. The institution sends a copy of the recommendation to the PhD student or author as soon as possible. The timetable must allow one week for the approval by the graduate school of the committee's preliminary recommendation. The PhD student must receive the preliminary recommendation no later than three weeks before the defence. The final date of the defence must be agreed with the PhD student once it is clear that the dissertation has been accepted for defence.

When dissertations are resubmitted after being revised, the assessment committee's reassessment must take its point of departure in the earlier assessment, and must in particular consider whether the revised dissertation has been sufficiently improved in relation to the points made in the earlier assessment.

3.1 Chair of the assessment committee

The chair of the assessment committee will inform the committee of the rules applying to the assessment, the way the recommendation is expressed, and the tasks of the assessment committee members in connection with the defence. Once they have been appointed, the assessment committee members will be informed of this in writing. The chair is responsible for coordinating the work of the committee and ensuring that deadlines and other formalities are complied with. The chair is responsible for combining the written contributions into a recommendation, and must ensure the linguistic quality of the recommendation so it constitutes a coherent text with a clear connection between the premises and conclusion. The head of the graduate school can provide advice and guidelines, and should be contacted with any queries. Any contact between the assessment committee and the PhD student must go via the graduate school secretariat. If any comments are received following the legality check, from the graduate school or from the Academic Council, the chair is responsible for responding and if necessary (after consulting with the other committee members) adjusting the recommendation.

The chair must ensure that the principal supervisor is able to follow the work of the

committee from the outset. If the chair discovers during the work of the assessment committee that there is a prospect of a non-unanimous recommendation or a unanimous negative recommendation being made, the graduate school will be contacted immediately.

The chair is also responsible for ensuring that the plan for the task of assessment is observed, and for informing the graduate school if there are any delays or other problems. And finally, when dissertations are accepted for defence, the chair is responsible for allocating roles and tasks to the assessment committee members for the defence proceedings, including agreeing which topics should be brought up and which committee members should be the first and second opponents. The chair is then responsible for drawing up the final recommendation, as was the case with the preliminary recommendation.

3.2 Role of the principal supervisor

The PhD student's principal supervisor sits on the assessment committee without voting rights. Among other things, this is to allow the principal supervisor to inform the assessment committee of any factors which may have a bearing on the academic assessment. The principal supervisor must keep up to date with all phases of the work of the assessment committee, and is entitled to receive the information needed to do this.

3.3 Conclusion of the recommendation

The assessment committee may recommend that the dissertation is suitable for defence, or that the dissertation is not suitable. In the latter case, the assessment committee must state in the recommendation whether the PhD dissertation may be resubmitted in a revised version, and if so which deadline applies for this.

3.4 Further processing

The chair of the assessment committee sends the preliminary recommendation to the graduate school, which will arrange for the legality check and quality assurance of the recommendation. If necessary, the PhD programme director will assist the head of the graduate school in his/her approval of the preliminary recommendation. The recommendation must be drawn up in such a way that it constitutes a correct and satisfactory decision-making basis in accordance with the current rules and guidelines. If this is not the case, the head of the graduate school or the PhD secretariat may ask the assessment committee to expand or revise parts of the assessment. The PhD student or the author and the principal supervisor must be allowed a period of at least two weeks to submit their comments on the recommendation. If any comments are made on the recommendation, the graduate school will inform the Academic Council of them.

If the recommendation is not favourable, the head of the graduate school makes one of the following decisions based on the assessment committee's recommendation and any comments made by the PhD student or author and the principal supervisor:

- 1) That the public defence cannot be held.
- 2) That the PhD dissertation may be resubmitted in a revised version within a period of at least three months. If the dissertation is resubmitted, it will be assessed by the original assessment committee unless special circumstances apply.

3) That the PhD dissertation will be referred to a new assessment committee for assessment.

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3.5 Details regarding the preliminary recommendation

The recommendation should be a maximum of 5-7 pages. The recommendation must state whether the dissertation in its current form is suitable for defence. The recommendation must state reasons, and it must take the form of an independent document with a short presentation of the theme and structure of the dissertation and a statement of the strengths and weaknesses of the dissertation. The premises on which the committee's assessment is based must be stated clearly. The recommendation must be detailed, clear and exhaustive enough to enable non-specialists to follow its thinking from premises to conclusion.

The following terms apply to both preliminary and final recommendations: The language used must be sober, impartial and objective. If all the committee members can read Danish, the recommendation can be written in Danish. The recommendation can also be written in English. If any of the committee members do not understand Danish, the recommendation must be written in English. The chair of the assessment committee is responsible for ensuring the linguistic quality of the recommendation. The recommendation must be written on AU stationery with the name and position of the chair in the colophon. The logo and colophon must appear on all the pages, although only the colophon and the name of the school/faculty centre from page 2 onwards. The recommendation must be paginated. The last page of the final recommendation must contain some text apart from the names and signatures of the assessment committee members.

Detailed instructions for layout/linguistic improvements and changes (including specific comments on proofreading) should be avoided in the recommendation. If necessary, the assessment committee can draw up a supplementary list of mistakes, proofreading comments etc.

In special circumstances, and subject to dispensation granted by the head of graduate school, the recommendation can be written in a language other than Danish or English. This will normally be the case when dispensation has been granted to write the PhD dissertation in a language other than Danish or English, and is also connected to the decision regarding the composition of the assessment committee.

3.6 Structure and content of the recommendation

Heading: Preliminary recommendation

Please state the name of the author and the full title of the dissertation. The text must state that this is a PhD dissertation.

First section

Please state the composition of the assessment committee: names, academic titles, and the names of the institutions to which they belong, including the country for members from outside Denmark. The chair of the committee must also be indicated.

Please state the name of the principal supervisor (name, title, home institution) and confirm that the principal supervisor has taken part in the work of the assessment committee without voting rights. If the dissertation has been submitted without the

student being registered as a PhD student (section 15(2) of the PhD Order – the dispensation clause), please state that this is the case.

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Second section

The second section must explain the form of the dissertation (monograph, articles, Danish and English summary, appendices etc.), as well as its length (number of pages excluding appendices, and number of pages of appendices). If the PhD dissertation includes work that has been written or published in collaboration with others, please state that this is the case.

Third section

The third section of the recommendation must start with a brief summary of the issue dealt with by the dissertation, as well as describing the basis of the theory and sources used, the choice of method and the structure. This should be followed by the critical assessment (stating the arguments), drawn up with a view to ensuring that the relationship between strengths and weaknesses is stated so clearly that the conclusion seems fully justified. In this section the recommendation should state the dissertation's contribution to research and place the dissertation in relation to the international research status of the topic concerned. The recommendation must also contain a conclusion as to whether the relevant research results are well founded and presented in accordance with the demands of the academic areas in question with regard to documentation, method and argumentation. If works are included in the dissertation that were written in collaboration with other people, or research results obtained in collaboration with other people, this section of the recommendation can also consider the independent, original contribution of the author.

The assessment should also include a brief evaluation of the dissertation's thoroughness, acribia and form. However, criticism of form or details should be presented secondarily and in proportion to the assessment of the central academic issues in relation to the dissertation's empirical data, documentation, method and theory foundation, position in relation to other international research etc. It should be clear whether any criticism of the dissertation's language, form or academic acribia is so significant that it raises questions about the tenability of the dissertation's central hypotheses and research results. The third section should conclude with a rounded, overall evaluation preparing the way for the conclusion.

Fourth section

The committee's conclusion as to whether the dissertation is suitable for defence. The assessment committee can make the following recommendations:

1. "A unanimous assessment committee recommends that the dissertation should be accepted for defence"
2. "A majority of the assessment committee recommends that the dissertation should be accepted for defence, while a minority of the assessment committee recommends [that the dissertation should not be accepted for defence or that the author should have the opportunity to revise and resubmit the dissertation]"
3. "A unanimous assessment committee recommends that the dissertation should not be accepted for defence"
4. "A majority of the assessment committee recommends [that the dissertation should not be accepted for defence or that the author should have the oppor-

tunity to revise and resubmit the dissertation], while a minority of the assessment committee recommends that the dissertation should be accepted for defence”

5. Finally, the assessment committee may be equally divided, with one member for each of the three viewpoints (acceptance for defence, revision, non-acceptance for defence)

The conclusion must be expressed in the form of a declaration and must not contain moderating expressions such as “...are in no doubt that...” or “despite the points mentioned above...”. It must be stated clearly whether the recommendation is unanimous or whether there is a split verdict, and in the latter case which members of the assessment committee have which viewpoints.

If the committee recommends that the PhD dissertation can be submitted in a new, revised form, the recommendation must state clearly which parts of the dissertation need be improved if the revised dissertation is to be recommended for defence after being resubmitted.

Fifth section

Please state the tentative date of the defence. The date and time of the defence must be arranged to comply with the deadline stated in section 20(2) of the PhD Order. The date and time must be agreed with the PhD student/author.

Sixth section

Date and signatures. The preliminary recommendation can be signed by the chair of the assessment committee on behalf of the committee.

4. Public defence

The defence proceedings are described in the PhD Order and sections 19 and 20 of the appurtenant guidelines, and in points 8, 8.1 and 8.2 of the guidelines for the PhD degree programme issued by the Graduate School, Arts. The defence takes place no less than two weeks after the assessment committee has submitted its recommendation. The defence must take place within three months of the submission of the PhD dissertation. The month of July is not included when calculating the three-month deadline. The defence may not be held outside the normal semester months, i.e. not in January or July-August.

During the defence proceedings, the PhD student or author must be given the opportunity to explain his or her work and defend the PhD dissertation before the members of the assessment committee. The defence proceedings will be chaired by a member of academic staff who is appointed by the graduate school.

The defence may last a maximum of three hours, including a break of around 15 minutes. After an introduction by the chair, the author of the dissertation will present his or her work. This presentation may not last more than 30 minutes. Then the author will be examined by the members of the assessment committee on issues related to the PhD dissertation. The opposition to the dissertation will take the form of a critical dialogue with the author. During the opposition the author must be given the opportunity to defend his/her results in the dissertation. Committee members agree among themselves the order of their contributions, but the chair of the committee

will usually speak last. The two external opponents will normally have 40 minutes each, while the chair of the assessment committee will normally have 30 minutes both for making points in opposition and for summing up. The chair of the defence proceedings may give other people the opportunity to make points *ex auditorio* during the defence. Those who wish to make such points must announce their intention during the break in the defence proceedings at the latest. *Ex auditorio* points from the audience will be taken immediately after the break, and may not last more than a total of 20 minutes. After all the contributions to the discussion have been made and answered, the chair of the assessment committee will round off the proceedings by summing up. This concludes the defence proceedings.

Immediately after the conclusion of the defence, the assessment committee will withdraw to make a decision as to whether they will recommend the award of the PhD degree on the basis of the defence. If the members of the committee are unanimously of the opinion that the PhD degree can be awarded, the chair of the committee may announce this orally.

On the basis of the dissertation and the defence, the assessment committee must assess whether the relevant requirements have been met pursuant to section 21 of the PhD Order. The recommendation must be made without undue delay out of consideration for the PhD student or author.

5. The final recommendation

The final recommendation is described in the PhD Order and sections 21 and 22 of the appurtenant guidelines, and in points 9.1 and 9.2 of the guidelines for the PhD degree programme issued by the Graduate School, Arts. The final recommendation is the recommendation to the institution concerned regarding the award of the PhD degree. The recommendation should be a maximum of 5-7 pages. The title of the document is: Recommendation regarding PhD degree.

The assessment committee must issue its final recommendation within one week of the defence, including an overall assessment of the dissertation and the oral defence. This must observe the same formal requirements and contain the same information as the preliminary recommendation, as well as a brief account of the oral defence proceedings. This account must be included as an integral part of the assessment, and the date of the defence must be stated. If aspects of the dissertation come to light during the defence that give the committee reason to amend their descriptions and assessments of the dissertation in the preliminary recommendation, the final recommendation must be revised accordingly. Observations and points arising from the oral defence which are of importance for the assessment of the research results achieved should be included in the third section. The recommendation should be concluded with the committee's final recommendation. It must be stated whether the recommendation is unanimous or not. If the recommendation is not unanimous, there must be a brief explanation of the issues to which the minority and majority respectively have attached importance in their different conclusions.

The summary section recommending that the dissertation should be accepted for oral defence should be deleted. If the dissertation has been assessed previously and resubmitted after necessary revisions, the recommendation must be expressed in a manner that ensures that the final wording does not reveal this fact.

If the recommendation of the assessment committee is negative, the chair of the assessment committee will notify the graduate school of this as quickly as possible, and the graduate school will inform the PhD student/author as soon as possible.

If the assessment committee so wishes, the final recommendation may include a separate appendix recommending that the academic results should be published.

The final recommendation must be signed by all the committee members. In special circumstances the chair of the assessment committee may agree with the PhD secretariat that the final recommendation should be signed by the chair following written authorisation (by email, for instance) from the other committee members.

5.1 Further processing

The chair of the assessment committee sends the final recommendation to the graduate school, which will arrange for the legality check and quality assurance of the recommendation. The head of the graduate school is responsible for approval. The recommendation must be drawn up in such a way that it constitutes a correct and satisfactory decision-making basis in accordance with the current rules and guidelines. If this is not the case, the head of the graduate school or the PhD secretariat may ask the assessment committee to expand or revise parts of the assessment.

After the final legality check and quality assurance, the recommendation is sent to the Academic Council, who make the decision about awarding the PhD degree in accordance with section 22 of the PhD Order. The PhD degree can be awarded if the assessment committee submits a recommendation to that effect. At the universities, the authority to award the PhD degree has been delegated to the academic councils, see section 15(2), no. 4, of the Danish University Act. It is normally assumed that the Academic Council's award of the PhD degree is a formality, since the award of the degree is based on an in-depth academic assessment. So it must be assumed that the council will only make the exceptional decision to ignore the recommendation of the assessment committee if extremely important reasons apply – this is because the academic assessment has been thorough and the assessment committee have specific competences.

If the recommendation of the assessment committee is negative, the Academic Council may decide to allow the dissertation to be assessed by a new assessment committee, if so requested by the author within a period of at least one week.

Changes after 1 July 2015

Section 3.2 revised on 27 September 2023: The section was amended to be identical to the general rules for the PhD degree programme.