
Guidelines for dissertation seminars (feedback for PhD students) at the Graduate School, Faculty of Arts, Aarhus University

The aim of this memo is to provide inspiration for the dissertation seminars which are conducted by the graduate school approximately one year before the end of the period of enrolment. The memo is based on the experience gained in previous seminars and the wish to share best practices.

The faculty's schools also have their own memos describing other aspects of these seminars – for instance financial issues. In particular, this memo is designed to provide inspiration for the principal supervisors responsible for organising dissertation seminars for their PhD students. It is important to stress that dissertation seminars should not be regarded as a chance to preempt the PhD defence proceedings. They should not be seen as some kind of mock exam. The main objective is to ensure that students do not start writing their dissertation too late in a PhD process which consists of many different stages. The seminar also gives PhD students the opportunity to discuss selected parts of their dissertation as well as its objective, structure and timetable. In other words, the seminar gives PhD students and their supervisors the chance to hear what other people think about the material that has been produced so far.

Rules and regulations

Rules for the PhD programme at the Graduate School, Faculty of Arts, section 4.3:

https://phd.arts.au.dk/fileadmin/phd.arts.au.dk/AR/Generelle_retningslinjer_UK_1-11-2012.pdf

“In connection with the semi-annual evaluation 12 months before the end of the period of enrolment on the PhD programme, a dissertation/thesis seminar will be arranged at which the PhD student must present an outline of the planned dissertation, including selected written examples of the basic hypotheses, theories and methods. The outline

will be critically discussed among the PhD student, principal supervisor, and expert senior researchers. The dissertation/thesis seminar may be arranged by the department or in connection with an event at a Danish or foreign institution. The dissertation/thesis seminar may form part of the background for the semi-annual evaluation. The principal supervisor is, in close dialogue with the PhD student, responsible for contacting the PhD programme/research programme/department to organise the dissertation/thesis seminar. Opponents at dissertation/thesis seminars are at later point allowed to be part of the committee that will be assessing the final PhD dissertation.”

What do these ‘written examples’ include?

The written product which is presented and discussed at the seminar may include the following:

- An introduction to and/or outline of the total monograph/article-based dissertation.
- Drafts of one or more chapters.

The total number of pages is not expected to constitute more than 25% of the final dissertation and may not exceed 60 pages.

The opponents may be researchers who work within the same field or with the same focus, theory development or methodological approach as the PhD student. The opponents should read the written product and prepare questions for it.

Proposed format of dissertation seminars

Dissertation seminars can be either internal or external events. They can be open or closed events, and can be organised in the form of independent events or linked to open seminars. A list of ideas about how to organise dissertation seminars is presented below. What all these ideas have in common is that the PhD student must prepare a written product (see above), which is then distributed to all the supervisors and selected opponents. The opponents used at the dissertation seminar may also be the opponents for the final PhD dissertation.

Dissertation seminars can be organised in the form of:

- A closed meeting with a minimum of one-two invited senior researchers, the principal supervisor and (to the extent possible) co-supervisor(s).

- A meeting with a group of researchers at which the PhD student presents selected parts of their written work. The research group may be associated with a specific department, research programme, centre etc. The participants in the dissertation seminar include opponents as well as the principal supervisor and co-supervisor(s). Subject to the agreement of the PhD student, other invited researchers (both senior and junior) may also participate. Specific feedback is given by the opponent(s), while the rest of the participants present their comments. If the PhD student wants to give other participants the chance to give specific feedback as well, they can send the written product to all the participants.
- An open seminar: If the PhD student agrees, the seminar can be organised in the form of an open seminar in which all interested parties can participate. The two main opponents provide specific feedback. This can be followed by questions from the floor.
- In connection with an open seminar or conference at which the dissertation seminar is the reason for (or a contribution to) the seminar/conference in question. The seminar/conference can be held either in Denmark or abroad. The PhD student should present the key elements of their PhD project. The PhD student prepares and distributes the agreed written product and receives feedback from at least two opponents. Some of the external opponents may be remunerated for carrying out this task. This type of dissertation seminar helps the PhD students to strengthen their international network.
- A combination between an open seminar and a closed meeting. At the open seminar, both the PhD student and the opponents present thematic papers relating to the subject of the dissertation. At the closed meeting, the opponents, supervisors and PhD student review the objective, structure and timetable of the written product which has been distributed.

Here is an example of a programme for a dissertation seminar:

A 20-30 minute presentation by the PhD student; 15-20 minutes for each of the two opponents (internal or external); and 20 minutes for a general discussion including the principal supervisor, co-supervisor(s), the PhD student and the rest of the audience/opponents. Following the dissertation seminar, the PhD student meets the principal supervisor and co-supervisor(s) to discuss key points of criticism from the seminar, including elements they need to work on in the ongoing writing process leading to the final monograph/collection of articles. The comments provided by the opponents can be written down by the principal supervisor with a view

to using them in the semi-annual evaluation. The PhD student may invite another junior researcher to take notes during the seminar, or the seminar can be recorded, in order to relieve the PhD student of the task of taking notes.