Information to members of the grading committee, the external reviewer and the chairperson of the public defence of doctoral thesis

Introduction

This document is a summary of the procedures and rules applied at Luleå University of Technology before and during a public thesis defence, and a description of roles of the actors involved.

The following actors participate in a public thesis defence:

- The author of the thesis (the PhD Student), hereafter “the candidate”
- The grading committee
- The external reviewer, hereafter “the opponent”
- The chairperson of the public thesis defence act, hereafter “the chairperson”
- The audience

The candidate

At a public thesis defence act, it is the candidate who is responsible for defending the thesis, demonstrating his or her competence and skills, and answering all questions raised by the external reviewer, the grading committee and the audience. Under no circumstances may questions be addressed to or answered by the supervisor or co-authors of scientific essays in the thesis.

The constitution of the grading committee

The following applies to the grading committee at a public thesis defence act:

- The grading committee shall consist of three members (if there are specific reasons, the number of members of the grading committee may increase to five, but not four, members). A reserve member shall be appointed.
- All members of the grading committee shall be associate professors or professors and both genders shall be represented. Specific reasons may be brought forward if one of the nominated members does not have the qualification required for appointment as a docent, or if the nominated grading committee consists of persons of the same gender.
- All members shall have expert knowledge within the field of research and/or the method. The combined competence of the grading committee shall cover the content of the thesis.
• The members of the grading committee shall be independent and shall not have any conflicts of interest in relation to the candidate, the supervisor and the project. It is the duty of the members of the grading committee to report any conflicts of interest themselves. For a definition, see Conflicts of interest, page 5.

• The majority of the appointed members of the grading committee shall work at a higher education institution other than LTU. A reserve member shall be appointed, preferably from another department than the candidate and the supervisor.

• The members of the grading committee are not remunerated for the assignment. However, travel and accommodation costs resulting from the assignment are reimbursed.

The role of the grading committee

The role of the grading committee is to be examiners at the public thesis defence act. A doctoral thesis shall be produced as a compilation thesis or as a monograph thesis. Most of the theses at the Luleå University of Technology are compilation theses, in that they consist of several scientific essays and an introductory part where the essays are introduced and discussed. A Degree of Doctor comprises 240 higher education credits, i.e. four years of full-time studies and includes both courses and scientific work. The number of scientific essays in a compilation thesis may vary, but in all they should have a scope that corresponds to the proportion that the scientific work amounts to in the study programme. The apportionment between courses and scientific work can be found in the general syllabus for the third-cycle subject area. The number of scientific essays is not crucial; it is the scope and the quality of the material being presented that shall be assessed. This means that a fewer number of scientific essays, of which the candidate is the principal author and that are published in some of the more well-known scientific journals, probably implies an achievement of higher quality by the candidate, than a higher number of scientific essays written by a large number of researchers where the contribution of the candidate is modest.

At least three weeks before the public thesis defence act, the candidate shall send the printed thesis to the members of the grading committee. Any other contact before the public thesis defence between the candidate and the members of the grading committee shall be confined to practical matters. In case the members of the grading committee would like a clarification on scope or quality of the thesis and its scientific essays, or in case there are reasons to suspect research misconduct, see Unexpected circumstances, page 4.

The grading committee shall assess the thesis and the public thesis defence as regards to:

• The candidate’s discussion with the opponent and ability to respond to questions and to discuss the significance of his or her results within the field of research.

• For a compilation thesis, the quality of the introductory chapter and the content in the scientific essays included in the thesis.

• For a monograph thesis, the quality of the whole thesis.

In the light of this assessment, the grading committee may award the grade ‘pass’ or ‘fail’. Majority decision applies. If the grade ‘fail’ is awarded, a separate written explanatory statement shall be provided.
The role of the opponent

The opponent shall have expert knowledge in the field of research of the thesis, with at least qualification required for appointment as associate professor, and shall not work at Luleå University of Technology. The opponent shall be independent and shall not have any conflict of interest in relation to the candidate, the supervisor or the project. It is the duty of the opponent to report any conflicts of interest him- or herself (for a definition, see Conflicts of interest, page 5).

At least three weeks before the public thesis defence act, the candidate shall send the printed thesis to the opponent. The role of the opponent is to scrutinise all parts of the thesis, both the introductory part where the essays are introduced and discussed and the scientific essays included, and also to discuss them in depth with the candidate at the public thesis defence act (see The public thesis defence act, page 4). The opponent shall highlight both strong and weak aspects of the thesis in a discussion with the candidate, during which the latter also shall have the opportunity to demonstrate his or her knowledge.

Any other contact between the candidate and the opponent before the public thesis defence shall be confined to practical matters. If the external reviewer would like a clarification on scope or quality of the thesis and its scientific essays, or if there are reasons to suspect research misconduct, see Unexpected circumstances, page 4.

The opponent is remunerated for the assignment (the department administrator may indicate the relevant fee and handles the administration of the payment). In addition, travel and accommodation costs resulting from the assignment are reimbursed.

The role of the chairperson of the public defence act of doctoral thesis

The chairperson leads the public thesis defence act. At least three weeks before the public thesis defence act, the candidate shall send the printed thesis to the chairperson.

The role of the chairperson is to coordinate the public thesis defence act and to be the representative of Luleå University of Technology. He or she is expected to be conversant with the procedure of a public thesis defence (see The public thesis defence act, page 4) and to manage difficulties, if any, in connection to the public thesis defence act (see Unexpected situations, page 4).

The chairperson is not remunerated for the assignment.

The audience

The public thesis defence act is open to all. It is often the case that friends and family, colleagues and other interested parties sit in as audience members, either just during the presentation or during the whole public thesis defence act. After the opponent and the grading committee have asked their questions, the chairperson invites the audience to ask questions to the candidate.
The public thesis defence act

The doctoral thesis shall be defended orally at a public thesis defence act. The public thesis defence act shall be open to all and may be conducted in Swedish, English, Norwegian or Danish at one of the University campuses. If the act is long, the chairperson may decide to have a brief pause. Under no circumstances may the public thesis defence act finish before all questions from and discussion of the opponent, the grading committee and audience have been addressed. However, a guiding value is that the public thesis defence act normally should be finished within 3.5 hours.

The public thesis defence act:

- The chairperson opens the public thesis defence act and introduces the candidate, the title of the thesis to be defended, the opponent and the grading committee.
- The candidate indicates corrections in the thesis, if any, and may distribute an errata list, if necessary.
- The candidate and/or the external reviewer presents the principal results and conclusions of the thesis. A short, simplified introduction of the thesis and of the field of research sometimes supplements the presentation. This normally takes 15-30 minutes, in all.
- The opponent discusses the thesis with the candidate, points out strengths and weaknesses and asks questions that the candidate shall answer, to the best of his or her ability. This part is estimated to last for one to three hours.
- The chairperson invites the grading committee to ask questions to the candidate.
- The chairperson invites the audience to ask questions to the candidate.
- The chairperson closes the public thesis defence act.

The decision meeting

After the public thesis defence, the grading committee meets to award the grade. The examining committee appoints among their number a chairperson of the decision meeting (one of the three members). The grading committee’s meeting consists of two parts:

1. During the first part of the meeting, the chairperson of the public thesis defence act, the supervisor and the opponent are invited to attend the meeting. Hereby, the grading committee has the opportunity to discuss the candidate’s performance with these actors.
2. Before the second part of the meeting, the grading committee decides if anybody in addition to the grading committee shall attend when the grade is awarded. However, it is only the grading committee that participates in the decision. After the decision is made, a grade protocol is completed and signed. The chairperson of the public thesis defence act may provide practical assistance on how the protocol should be completed.

If remarks of such exceptional nature emerge during the public thesis defence act that the grading committee finds it necessary to carry out special examinations or consultations before its decision, the grading committee may adjourn this meeting. The adjournment shall be short, maximum two weeks.

Unexpected situations

Sometimes situations arise in which the public thesis defence act does not run according to usual routine, and it is then the duty of the chairperson to manage them.
If one of the actors does not appear at the public thesis defence act, it is possible to await the late arrival or to replace the person in question. A total of three members of the grading committee must be present for the public thesis defence act to be carried out. If a member of the grading committee does not appear, the chairperson shall contact the reserve member.

If the opponent does not appear at the public thesis defence, it may still be held if a member of the grading committee replaces the opponent. In such case, the member of the grading committee resigns from his or her assignment. It is the faculty dean who shall decide on the transfer from member of grading committee to opponent. If this is not possible, the chairperson may decide which member of the examining committee who shall act as opponent. When a full member of the grading committee acts as opponent, the reserve member is called to attend the grading committee.

If there is a suspicion of research misconduct, cheating, conflicts of interest or other kinds of misconduct before or during the public thesis defence act, the faculty dean shall be notified - the easiest way to do that is to contact an administrator at Analys och beredning, +46 (0)920-49 10 00.

Conflicts of interest

The members of the grading committee and the opponent are required to report conflicts of interest themselves, if such exist in relation to supervisors, the candidate or project. Provisions on conflicts of interest can be found in the Administrative Procedure Act (2017:900), which is a general act for all authorities. When assessing conflicts of interests, the University has decided that the following practice shall apply, in addition to the Act:

- There is a conflict of interest when scientific cooperation and coproduction have existed during the last five years.

If a close cooperation has existed, it may be considered as a conflict of interest even if more than five years has passed. The relation between the candidate and his/her principal supervisor(s) is always considered a conflict of interest.