

The Experience of ‘Defending’ the Doctoral Dissertation

International Comparative Studies of the
Final Oral Examination

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Chapter 5 Supervisor roles before, during, and after the defence

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5 Supervisor roles before, during, and after the defence

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Introduction

As is evident from other chapters in this publication as well as from previous studies, the experience of the final stages of earning a doctoral degree in the social sciences varies considerably based on factors such as geographical context (national, state, and local), research area (e.g. education, philosophy), and specific university requirements, and Lum et al. (2023) observed that the ‘assessment of PhDs, particularly the written thesis but also to a large extent the oral examination, is largely an occluded practice’ (p. 34). Among these many factors, Orellana et al. (2016) emphasized the importance of the relationship between the supervisor and the PhD candidate for the success of the student’s PhD project, and given that most PhD studies span several years, it is logical that the relationship between supervisor and student plays a crucial role in the PhD experience. Supervising a PhD thesis carries significant responsibility, as it involves the highest academic degree either being conferred or denied. Consequently, PhD supervision is complex and demanding in many ways (Prazeres, 2017) and also constitutes ‘an emotional process, with many expectations from both sides’, the student and the supervisor (Almusaed & Almssad, 2020, p. 25). This chapter investigates the varying roles of supervisors, from submission of the thesis through the oral defence and the post-defence stage.

Thematic analysis was carried out on the data of the 11 cases including interviews with supervisors, advisory committee members, examiners, and PhD candidates before and after the oral defence, as well as observations of the defence. We identified recurring themes shedding light on the varying practices and experiences related to supervisors. It is important to note that various terms are used for supervisors, including ‘major/main advisors’ in the USA. This role is distinct from that of colleagues who serve on advisory boards or committees.

Roles of supervisors

Before the defence

Making the decision to submit a thesis is arguably the most crucial step in the final stage of doctoral studies. In the regulatory documents of most universities under study, it is the candidate who initiates the process of sending the formal application for a defence and opening the conversation with their supervisor. For instance, at Primorska, a candidate makes the decision to submit, either alone or in consultation with their supervisor. Similarly, in universities like Augsburg, Southern Denmark, and Connecticut, the decision is made by the candidate independently after discussions with their supervisor. The supervisor at Southern Denmark said:

The decision to submit was taken by the candidate herself, though in principle a supervisor might say that it is not (yet) a good idea to submit.

However, even if the decision is made by the candidate alone, the application for thesis defence still requires the supervisor's signature before moving to the Dean or another authority for approval. At BLCU, the defence application (signed by the supervisor) is submitted to the Graduate School one and a half months before the planned defence, and then the supervisor sets up a review team to assess the candidate's qualifications, including course credits and an appraisal of their political, ideological, and moral integrity.

At Connecticut, the decision to submit the dissertation is typically a matter of conversation between the supervisor and the candidate, with the former often guiding the timing of submission. The Connecticut supervisor mentioned that they had to 'put the brakes on' to ensure the candidate did not keep working indefinitely. Therefore, while candidates may initiate the conversation, supervisors often bear the responsibility of determining readiness for submission, as candidates trust their supervisor's judgement. The dissertation is then made available to readers, and the defence is announced to the public through specific channels.

At Primorska, the candidate said he followed their supervisor's advice because the supervisor is 'in charge' and knows when the work is sufficient. The Aveiro candidate similarly noted that the decision was largely made by the supervisor, who asserted that the thesis was ready. The supervisor confirmed this, acknowledging his significant responsibility for the decision. In the Versailles case too, the decision to submit is made in consultation with the supervisor, with the process involving intense dialogue. In regulatory documents of these universities, it is the candidate who is responsible for submission decision. In reality, however, it is the supervisor's responsibility to decide.

Supervisors have their criteria for this decision which seem to be subjective. For example, the Aveiro supervisor looks for global coherence and adherence to quality parameters, while the Durham supervisor requires the thesis to move

beyond a descriptive report to reach a doctorate level of analysis. The Trieste supervisor emphasizes the validity and originality of the work. The Versailles supervisor describes his expectations as coherence, quality, and demonstration of competencies expected at the doctoral level. Permission to defend a thesis is then given by the head of the institution on the supervisor's recommendation. In short, the supervisor in all cases plays a crucial role in ensuring the thesis meets the necessary standards before submission.

Additionally, some supervisors prepare candidates for the thesis defence, providing both psychological and academic guidance, though this role is not explicitly prescribed in the documentation of the universities. Managing expectations is a crucial area where the supervisor's role is significant before the defence takes place. The supervisor helps the candidate to prepare by discussing the nature of the event 'an opportunity to talk to two people who have actually read your work', who will be 'critical but not negative' (Durham supervisor). Good performance at the defence can be partly attributed to the candidate's ability to anticipate questions and manage their responses. This preparation makes the defence a meaningful event and helps manage the candidate's state of mind. On the other hand, some supervisors, like those at Trieste, believe candidates are mature adults and should independently answer questions during the defence, and the supervisor is not supposed to prepare questions for the candidate in advance.

During the defence

Regulatory documents as well as oral accounts by the interviewees indicate that the supervisor's presence at the oral defence can range from being a full decision-making committee member (e.g. Connecticut, Saarland), through being a committee member with no role in decision-making (e.g. Versailles), to being an observer among the audience who may ask a question (Southern Denmark) or an invited observer who must remain silent (Durham).

When on the committee, supervisors may serve as chairpersons and active members as at Augsburg and Connecticut, where supervisors assume leading roles, chairing the defence, and asking the first question as the first examiner. At Aveiro, the supervisor is just one of the examiners and speaks last.

In public defences, the supervisor often has a ceremonial speaking role at the beginning or end of the session. For instance, at Primorska, the supervisor praises the candidate's qualities and takes responsibility for methodological choices during their speech. At Connecticut, the supervisor introduces the candidate and oversees the flow of questions and the general procedures.

In the majority of our cases, the supervisor primarily plays supporting roles. For example, at Versailles, the supervisor speaks last and reports on the candidate's trajectory, work, and progress over the years. Similarly, at BLCU, the supervisor introduces the candidate's academic performance and research achievements, verifying that the required courses and credits for graduation have been completed. The supervisor also announces the grades for the thesis

given by the pre-defence reviewers. This role applies at Primorska as well, where the supervisor, though an observer, is invited to comment on the candidate's work. In these instances, the supervisor's presence is mandatory, as both the examiners and supervisor need to sign the defence protocol. In the case of Southern Denmark, the supervisor assists and provides information to the assessment committee but does not attend their meetings. In this case, the supervisor asked a question during the defence and delivered a speech in the celebration afterwards, reflecting on their experience working with the candidate and expressing appreciation. This practice is customary but is not part of the formal defence procedure. Even when the supervisor is only an observer, they may take the role of note-taker. For instance, the supervisor at Durham, whose presence in the defence in private is by invitation provided the candidate agrees, makes notes throughout the defence and uses them in their conversation with candidates after the defence.

In most of the cases, the supervisor's presence and reaction are felt to facilitate candidates' performance. For example, at Durham the supervisor asks if the candidate wants a glass of water. Even when it is uncommon at Southern Denmark for the supervisor to ask a question, this might happen to help with the discussion. A supervisor might praise the candidate for answering the questions well during the defence (Connecticut) or during the break as encouragement when the candidate feels overwhelmed (Durham).

In contrast, supervisors at Trieste traditionally do not attend the defence, viewing it as a test for the candidate to face independently rather than a celebratory rite of passage as can be gleaned from the quotes below:

The supervisor has no role. I would say that normally he is not even present, even if it is not prohibited.

(Supervisor A)

He (The candidate) is adult enough and mature enough to do it on his own. This is what we normally think in Italy.

(Supervisor B)

They believe the candidate should demonstrate their maturity and ability to handle the defence alone. Both supervisors were confident in the quality of the theses, viewing their absence as a way to emphasize the candidate's independence.

There are some immediate post-defence roles to be taken by the supervisor, especially for those who have roles on the examining committee, such as signing the protocol documents. At Aveiro, the supervisor describes the private meeting, saying 'In general, I sit still and listen to my colleagues, I'm the last one to speak, so I don't influence the final judgement at all'.

If the thesis needs corrections required by the examining committee, in most cases under study, the supervisor will oversee and help the student with the thesis revision. The supervisor at Aveiro later completes a declaration of

conformity of the final version of the thesis. At BLCU too, the examiners usually leave the final check of the thesis to the supervisor.

After the defence

It is common practice in our cases for the supervisor and the candidate to meet after the defence to reflect on the session and to revise and to develop the thesis. For instance, at Connecticut, the supervisor and the candidate had a telephone conversation about a week after the defence to talk through feedback systematically, and in anticipation the supervisor said she writes up her notes so that the candidate has a record and knows that there were certain themes which emerged for him to think further about. These included questions to which he had responded and which any future text would need to reflect.

Likewise at Durham, both supervisors explained they had already planned to meet the candidate soon after receiving the report from the examiners to ensure the candidate understood the required work and to reassure her. One supervisor explained the examiners' final, joint report and the procedure to respond to it. The report highlights the substantive points which need to be addressed where the candidate is asked to develop her thinking and elaborate on findings.

Generally in our cases, the defence is taken as the end of the formal relationship of supervision. The supervisor at Augsburg said her role as supervisor is now over although she will continue to have personal and professional contact, in part through the candidate's attendance at colloquia. She is no longer the 'doctor mother' since the candidate is now 'grown up and an adult' in academic terms. Similarly at Trieste, supervisor A emphasizes that he has no formal role in the future development of the student but would support him in various ways such as writing a letter of endorsement if he was asked to do so. Supervisor B says:

There are no responsibilities, so my role is . . . absolutely informal. If he is a doctor . . . or as a young scholar, he believes he will continue to work and believes that contact with me could be useful to him. I'm available.

The Aveiro supervisor says that his role varies according to the candidate, 'I have a role if they think I should be consulted', implying the future relationship is not dominated by the supervisor anymore.

Publication is a frequent theme where there may be some expectations of the supervisor, but supervisors prefer to assume a facilitating role than a dominant one. The Aveiro supervisor said that he thought it important not to 'impose' or 'take the initiative'. The supervisor-candidate relationship may continue to develop mainly in disseminating and publicising the work.

At Trieste, the supervisor said he felt flattered to learn that the candidate was invited to publish his thesis as a monograph, and the candidate could turn to him for advice when preparing the text for publication but does not insist

on this due to the fact that his own area of expertise does not fully coincide with the research focus but, more importantly, because 'the PhD student is not so much a student as a young colleague. In short, he is even more recognizable now, no longer as a student, but as a young scholar'.

Emerging themes

In our previous project (Byram & Stoicheva, 2023), authors report on 13 cases of doctoral examinations in 13 countries. One finding was that the oral exam is not a compulsory component in all contexts (e.g. Australia) (Wagner et al., 2023), and these cases revealed variation in the supervisors' roles in convening the examiners of the thesis and in the oral defence. In some instances, students suggested to the supervisor the composition of the committee, which then played a significant role in examining the dissertation and determining the outcome of the defence. In other instances, the supervisor had no role in this process, and external examiners were appointed by the Dean. Similarly, while in most cases the supervisor played a crucial role in (a) deciding when a dissertation was ready to be submitted to the examiners; (b) evaluating the dissertation; and (c) administering, participating in, and evaluating the oral defence, there were also instances where supervisors were not permitted to be part of the evaluation process once the dissertation was submitted (Wagner et al., 2023).

Other research which deals with our focus here encompasses analysis of university documents (Tinkler & Jackson, 2000), examiners' reports (Johnston, 1997), international comparisons of examining procedures (Kyvik, 2014), and analysis of notes taken during the defence (Trafford, 2003). A key takeaway from these studies is that while there is some consensus regarding the assessment of dissertations and the responsibilities of supervising a dissertation, there exist considerable differences, particularly internationally, at the final stage of doctoral studies and the oral examination.

Similarly, the 11 cases in this study show varied approaches to regulating the role of supervisors with respect to their presence at the defence, the transition from supervisor to examiner, their formal or informal role in the decision-making process, and their relationships with the committee of examiners.

Whether the supervisor's role is formally acknowledged at this final stage of doctoral studies or they are not part of the committee making the final decision, it is important to recognize their critical role throughout the PhD journey. Even when the supervisor is not a member of the committee, they still have significant influence as gatekeepers to academia for candidates. For instance, the cases here show that their opinion is usually pivotal in determining the readiness of the dissertation, and that various formal mechanisms ensure that the supervisor's approval is necessary for submission for the defence.

There are also different interpretations of the end of the PhD journey, leading to different roles for the supervisor. The defence can mark the last stage

of the formal relationship between candidate and supervisor, where they both present the outcome of their collaborative work to external academic experts. Depending on the nature of the oral defence (real examination or ritual as described in other chapters of the book and in the case studies), the supervisor's experience varies:

At the internal defence we try hard to prove to the young colleague that there is still something to learn from us. At the public defence we try hard to prove that he is one of us, don't touch him or else . . . or we all help him.

(Sofia)

Similarly at BLCU, the supervisor may arrange a 'preparatory defence' with some members of the examining committee about two months before the actual defence, and before the thesis is submitted for review. Supervisors expect critical feedback in the preparatory defence and formative and constructive comments during the actual defence.

In some contexts, supervisors may choose not to be present at the defence even if permitted. In other contexts, the supervisor's role at the final defence is specifically regulated. They may be a member of the examination committee with voting rights or be required or expected to be physically present. The extent of the supervisor's involvement in the decision-making process varies, reflecting nuanced interpretations of their role at this final stage. In some cases, the supervisor undergoes a role transition, marking the end of their supervisory relationship and the beginning of the role of examiner (Augsburg, Saarland, Connecticut), but this change is seen as a change in activity rather than a fundamental change in their academic identity.

We can thus identify three positions representing the nature of this transition in role. First, the transition seems radical, from supervisor to examiner not just with voting rights but also as the chair and the host of the committee (for example, at Augsburg, Saarland, and Connecticut). This is a specific responsibility and authority given to the supervisor in addition to their powerful role before the defence, in particular, in the selection of members of the advisory committee which becomes the examining committee. However, the change is not seen as an issue by the Augsburg supervisor since the event is not like in secondary education where marks are given. Here, the purpose is to bring the candidate and thesis to 'the best possible result', which very much continues their role as supervisor. The supervisor at BLCU described her role as an 'invisible hand' responsible for every step in the process.

In the second position, the supervisor is given a specific role and voice to introduce the candidate as a new independent researcher. At Saarland, the supervisor becomes the first examiner, which is a sign of stepping back a little from the guiding supervising role. At Versailles, although the supervisor does not participate in the decision-making, there is lunch before the defence where the supervisor meets the members of the defence committee and is

invited to speak and contribute to the discussion, and as the last speaker in the defence he comments on the candidate's PhD journey. Similarly, at BLCU the supervisor's role is to not only introduce the candidate but also contribute with clarifications and explanations, if needed. In other cases, the supervisor's contribution to the discussion at the defence might not be formally regulated, but there is a general expectation on the side of the examiners that the voice of the supervisor is heard and the floor is specially given to them at the beginning or end of the defence, as in the Primorska case. In the Aveiro case, during the final, private discussion, the supervisor says he speaks last so as not to influence the final judgement of the committee. One Sofia interviewee mentions a case when the supervisor is asked to say a few words during the defence. On this occasion, the supervisor made a speech at the celebration immediately afterwards, while members of the examining committee and the audience were still there.

In the third position, the supervisor changes roles from a mentor to an observer, thus stepping further into the shadows, becoming a 'silent supervisor' (Kumar et al., 2022; Mežek, 2018), as in our cases at Primorska, Sofia, and Southern Denmark. The supervisor may, however, feel excluded from the celebration if not given the floor, as stated by some of the interviewees at Sofia. On the other hand, the supervisors in the Trieste case did not feel they have any role in the oral defence and took a rather detached position – not present 'even if it is not prohibited' – so as to ensure the focus is on the independent work of the candidate.

The three positions are also signalled in the seating positions of the supervisor during the defence. They may sit centrally and chair the committee (Connecticut, Saarland, Augsburg). In other cases, they sit next to other examiners (BLCU and Sofia) or behind the committee (Primorska) or in the audience (Southern Denmark).

There are intermediate cases which are related to the participation of the supervisor in the voting and decision-making process. The question why a supervisor would not participate in the voting process may be related to potential bias on the part of the supervisor and the fact that some of the ideas in the dissertation might have been theirs. For example, literature and/or the methodology used in the candidate's research is often suggested by the supervisor as the candidate cannot be expected to have sufficient knowledge in this area. However, the supervisor's voice can be heard even when they are an observer, for example, at Primorska during the defence, the supervisor is invited to say a few words about the candidate and their work during his doctorate.

It is important to note that in cases where the supervisor's role in decision-making is not allowed, it should not be seen as a lack of trust in their ability to change roles but rather a decision to enhance transparency and credibility through external expert assessment. Some interviewees are very conscious of this. A Durham supervisor says she never discusses the thesis with examiners. The Trieste supervisors have the same approach. On the other

hand, the interviews in this study reveal that meetings before and after the defence are common both with candidate and with examiners. The supervisor ensures that the defence is experienced as a meaningful conversation with academic peers rather than just an examination, a concern which leads to our final theme.

The emotional and psychological support provided by the presence of the supervisor is also important, especially in contexts where the candidate may feel vulnerable or nervous. At Durham, the presence of one supervisor in the room and the other online is crucial and evident in what they said to the candidate during the break.

For example, in the defence at Saarland, examiners use the candidate's first name and familiar 'Du' form of address, while at BLCU the candidate is told 'Don't be nervous', similar to Durham where an examiner says 'Don't think they are going to tear you apart'. In the Versailles case, the supervisor is away just before the defence and the candidate feels rather lonely although supported by the administration staff. At Durham, the supervisor meets the candidate half an hour before and they go together to the room, and the presence of one supervisor in the room and the other online is crucial and evident in what they said to the candidate during the break. Supervisors demonstrate generally awareness of candidates' 'vulnerable position, not because their work isn't of high quality, but because the examiner doesn't appreciate that approach to the work' (Durham supervisor). The candidate at Sofia – despite the confident impression he made at the defence – said afterwards that he felt his supervisor's presence both physically and emotionally:

He was present, he was even physically close, in one of the first places there next to the jury, to the members of the jury. I felt his presence as empathy and as support, I can say that with absolute certainty.

The supervisor can also provide other kinds of support during the defence, for example, by taking notes during the defence in order to support the candidate to make corrections after the defence in cases when specific minor or more detailed corrections are recommended or in support for preparing the work for publications after the defence (Durham, Connecticut, BLCU). In most of the cases where the supervisor is present at the defence, they take provide reassurance what (Kumar et al., 2022) call the 'smile and nod' role.

Conclusion

In summary, while all 11 cases confirm the critical roles of supervisors in the PhD candidates' journeys, including the final steps, right before, during, and even after the defence, analysis of the 11 cases confirmed the variability and complexity of the supervisor's roles across the different academic and geographical contexts. It revealed institutional differences in expectations of supervisors in the final stages of the PhD experience, for example, in formal

regulations and practices, informal practices and expectations, and in roles in the final oral exams.

The roles include being gatekeepers with regard to determining the readiness of a dissertation and in some cases assessing not only the dissertation but also the performance in the final oral defence. Perhaps most important is providing not only academic but also emotional support throughout the final stages of the PhD experience.

This international comparison has, therefore, shown that the experience of the defence is not the same everywhere even if superficially it may seem that 'a defence is a defence'. This is not to say that one is better than another. None of our candidate participants expressed any critical remarks or complaints, but of course they knew only one form of the defence and would have a fresh perspective if they were to read the accounts of defences in other places.

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