

The Experience of ‘Defending’ the Doctoral Dissertation

International Comparative Studies of the
Final Oral Examination

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Chapter 14 A case study of the PhD defence at Sofia University St Kliment Ohridski, Bulgaria

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14 A case study of the PhD defence at Sofia University St Kliment Ohridski, Bulgaria

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The Regulatory Framework

The regulatory framework¹ for awarding the research and educational degree of PhD is described in detail in the Regulations of Sofia University in compliance with the requirements in the Act for Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, 2022 (Закон за развитие на академичния състав).² They cover both the conditions and the process for its award including the different levels at which decisions are taken: the department into which the PhD student is enrolled, the Faculty Academic Council whose decisions regulate the process, the role of the supervisor, and the appointed examining committee that officially awards the degree of PhD. The Act for Development of Academic Staff, it should be added, also describes the conditions and the process in detail to which higher education institutions can add additional requirements and clarifications relevant to the specific higher education institution. A major specificity of the PhD studies is that all doctoral degree programmes are organized according to subject areas for which the higher education institutions have received assessment at ‘Very good’ level during the external accreditation procedure conducted by the National Agency for Evaluation and Accreditation.

Before the candidate can submit their dissertation for final public (oral) defence, PhD students must comply with a number of requirements. They must have taken successfully the examinations (often referred to as ‘doctorate minimums’), and all other tasks included in their individual doctoral studies plan approved by the Faculty Academic Council. This is accredited by obtaining a minimum of 180 credits, whose value is specifically described in the doctoral programme curricula of the corresponding subject area approved by the academic councils at faculty level of the higher education institution. The candidate must complete a dissertation which includes the results of the conducted research, and it must be discussed in the relevant department. A positive decision must be made about its readiness for defence. The written PhD thesis must be in line with the minimal requirements for research defined at national level in an Annex to the Act on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria. They include, apart from the completed dissertation,

the requirement for 30 points awarded for publications, which means at least three papers published.

The period of the candidate's studies is completed officially by a decision of the department and a proposal to the Academic Council that the candidate has the right to present their dissertation for discussion. This decision has to be taken immediately before or after the period of three or four years³ but not later than a month after the study period expires. The role of the supervisor here is critical as they are the first to assess the readiness of the dissertation for defence and propose it for discussion within the department.

The department in which the student is enrolled must discuss the dissertation within a month of its submission and make a decision. The term used for this is informally 'internal defence', and in general it can be considered having the characteristics of a defence in which the candidate has to present and prove the qualities of their work, answer questions, be exposed to criticism and, usually, suggestions for improvement, structural change, and additions. Often, it is referred to and considered a 'pre-defence' (discussion) and also involves academics external to the department. This then leads to approval or disapproval of the readiness of the text and starts the process of preparation for public defence.

The positive decision of the department is accompanied by a proposal to the Faculty Academic Council concerning the appointment of the 'jury' or examining committee for the public defence. The supervisor and the candidate can propose jury members, and they take part in the discussion of this proposal.⁴ The jury must be composed of five academics with *habilitation*⁵ in the subject area(s) of the dissertation, and they must be registered in the National Register of Academic Staff. At least one of them must be a professor and at least three external to the higher education institution.

According to the most recent amendment of the Act for Development of Academic Staff, the supervisor cannot be a member of the jury.

The jury members meet to choose a Chair and to decide who of them is going to write the two long and three short reviews required. Then, they have three months from submission to write the reviews which have to be made public and are published on the higher institution website for at least two weeks before the date of the defence. Reviews are published in Bulgarian and English translation.

The final meeting of the jury – the defence – is in public and follows an agenda specified in the Regulations (Art. 71). The award of the PhD degree is from the date of the official defence on condition that there are at least three positive reviews. At this public meeting of the jury, each member has to publicly (re-)confirm the decision in their review. Because of the long and multi-stage procedures, the public defence is generally considered an event with a positive outcome confirming the decision of the main academic unit to which the PhD student has been enrolled.

Two specific requirements are generally included in the Regulations concerning the content of the dissertation (or 'dissertation work'

(Дисертационен труд') as often referred to in official documentation). First, the 'dissertation has to demonstrate research or research application results which are an original contribution to science' (Art. 64 of the Regulations),⁶ and second, the candidate should demonstrate in-depth theoretical knowledge in the relevant subject area and a capacity for conducting independent research.

Before the defence

Writing and submitting the dissertation – views of candidate and supervisor

Candidate

The candidate describes the upcoming defence as 'exciting'; he says this word 'comes to my mind straight away'. His case is very specific although not unusual for Sofia University. He is a well-established professional, and the research topic is one that he has had a 'deep interest' in since a very young age, an interest which has developed as he was maturing. He goes on to add that he sees the whole process of being a PhD student as 'hard but worth-while task', a 'blessed process', which 'helps us develop not just as specialists but as personalities too', because it is like 'a dream come true'.

He shares his feeling of gratitude towards the department administering this particular doctoral programme and the academics there, because they have helped him in many ways, especially with getting around the structure of the learning process – courses, deadlines, required documents – 'the formal side of things', which were difficult for him. They were 'understanding', 'benevolent', and 'even friendly', which was somewhat unexpected because some of the academics are younger than him.

The dissertation text was refined after the internal defence according to the recommendations received, mainly from the supervisor who 'gave me some very good instructions about what to add' and from some academics who were invited to the internal defence. While working on this final version, the candidate himself spotted some areas which needed improvement and dealt with them. In his view, these recommendations, although not many or suggesting radical changes, were 'very precise' and 'in-depth'.

Supervisor

The supervisor has not supervised the development of the dissertation throughout the whole period because he had to step in due to exceptional circumstances. He felt this was an 'uncommon situation' because of the candidate's age ('I think he's older me') and his rich professional experience as an author and editor of various types of texts with a very specific personal style of expression:

it became clear from the outset that this was going to be a book. . . .
If you make this person write the way we are used to, you'll spoil him.
You'll spoil this person's text.

As a result of working together on the dissertation, a good result has been achieved and interestingly, during the internal defence, senior academics received the text better than junior ones who were more critical of it.

In the supervisor's view, another aspect which distinguishes the candidate from the average ones is his good time management: 'Usually during the last year of studies there is a strong pressure on the PhD to submit the text more quickly' and 'there is a rising nervousness on part of the PhD student and the supervisor'. However, this was not the case and the candidate has been working at a steady pace, going into details, and he was ready within the deadlines, even a bit earlier. In this sense, this was 'an exception'.

Preparation for the defence

In general, the members of the jury share the view that the purpose of this defence is no different from any other: that it is the logical ending of a specific process, which culminates with receiving an award, a process which was started due to the candidate's 'personal interest and research curiosity' (Examiner 4). Examiner 1 is of the opinion that public defences are merely a formality, where no actual defence takes place as the reviews are public for sufficient time in advance and everyone can read them. The examiner who is Chair of the jury agrees with this too – 'The purpose is always the same – to have a positive result'. Examiner 3 thinks that this is a kind of a 'ritual of putting a full stop' and goes on to conclude that public defences across Bulgarian universities are quite alike despite some minor differences in the regulations of different institutions. In addition, Examiner 1 expects that this particular defence will be connected with lots of positive emotions, she expects the final exam to be 'a celebration . . . because a long-term work gets its public recognition and I am glad that colleagues from the department have already started spreading information on social networks and it will become an open defence'.

Candidate and supervisor

The candidate believes that the public defence is 'the culmination of my work as a PhD student' and that the 'big challenge' is in having to present 'very clearly' his research to a wider audience – not just to the jury members but also to guests. He hopes to be able to make his presentation 'useful', 'interesting', and 'amusing' and for the audience to become aware what his own contribution to this 'rare' research topic is. His confidence stems from having developed his thesis over the course of the three years as a PhD student and even before that. He says he has been at other candidates' defences more than once, both at his faculty and at others, and this makes him sure of what is to

happen. He has also visited the room where the defence will be because, when realizing the potential number of guests, he felt 'alarmed' that the room might not be big enough.

Despite the candidate's confidence expressed in the interview, the supervisor says in his interview that he felt the candidate needed to be put at ease regarding the defence and he helped him prepare by inviting him to other public defences. He notes that usually the internal defence is a bigger obstacle than the final one:

At the internal defence we try hard to show the young colleague that there is still what to learn from us. At the public defence we try hard to show that he is one of us, don't touch him or else . . . or we all help him. This is . . . how to explain? Half-ritual and half-procedure. And we observe this.

This leads to the conclusion that

during the internal defence we are more critical, while at the final one the whole department demonstrates that the doctorand is already part of us. It is as much a defence as it is a ritual.

Reading the thesis and writing the reviews

The examiners received the dissertation in electronic form at the beginning of the summer, well ahead of the defence. Examiner 1 started to read it straight away because it was one of three to prepare reviews about and because it was the least known to her. Her approach to reading the text was no different from the routine she has established over long years of experience, and it helps her focus her attention on 'key things to comment on later'. She starts a separate file where she takes notes on the text: about the contents of the introduction, the argumentation of the thesis, how far the candidate is familiar with the literature on the topic, how 'purely academic' the language of the thesis is. She also copies certain paragraphs and words which have made an impression on her (both good and bad). She is also on the alert to detect plagiarism, as this is a very 'serious problem' at the moment as modern technology creates prerequisites for PhD candidates to 'appropriate knowledge', which in certain cases is not 'heavily reproachable' as this is the natural way of learning. However, a reviewer has the duty to be on the lookout for 'cases of downright plagiarism'. An important part of preparing for writing the review is to establish 'how much the PhD student collected the empirical material himself and how much he collected from elsewhere'. She had to ask for some 'additional administrative information which is supposed to be part of the procedure' and was ready with her review within about three weeks – 'so somewhere . . . let's roughly put it [within] a month . . . from the three-month deadline, I was ready, I translated [the review] and sent [it]'.

Examiner 2 prefers to read dissertations in an electronic version and considers it more convenient. She reads the whole text first, adding comments or highlighting passages. She then thinks over the 'reading as a whole' because 'sometimes something strikes me that it's not there, let's say in . . . the methodology part, [but] it appears later'.

Only after she has reached the end of the dissertation does she start to write the review. When writing it she considers the candidate's CV and the publications which are part of the materials at the reviewers' disposal. On the one hand, they serve as proof of the candidate's 'academic engagement with the thesis topic' and, on the other, the publications are part of the minimal national requirements for acquiring the degree. Where they are published is also something to take into account. Writing the review comes on top of many other work tasks which she has to juggle with. She received the dissertation early enough but did not start reading it immediately because of her tight schedule.

Examiner 3 prefers to read materials on paper but acknowledges that the modern world is 'dynamic' and more often than not he has to read theses, their abstracts and *habilitation* texts in an electronic format, which is the case with the dissertation in question. It was not easy to find necessary time to read the text and write the review but since this is something he had agreed to do, he managed by prioritizing his tasks.

Examiner 4 is on the 'internal members quota' and read the text several times in the process. She added that the candidate sought the opinion of other members of the department and specially emphasizes that all of them responded. It is part of the department's policy of 'taking care of students and doctorands':

all our PhD students every year organize a seminar where they have the opportunity to present parts of their thesis. . . . We have read, we have corrected [their texts] before defence, we have helped them a lot so that they (especially the last ones who have defended over the last 5 years . . .) can defend. . . . We never refuse.

This examiner, like Examiner 2, prefers to read the text as a whole taking notes and looking further in the text for understatements or omissions, and this first reading is very important to her. She reads the dissertation once more before writing the review, but this is only complementary to the first close reading, 'seated comfortably' in her 'favourite armchair'.

The Chair of the jury says that she likes reading dissertations in an electronic format and adds that she usually reads dissertations twice before writing her review. She takes notes in an electronic format too while doing so and finds this easier than writing on paper. She had received this dissertation before the rest of the examiners and reading it was a pleasure for her – 'easy' and 'fun to read'.

Criteria

The supervisor refers to a standard document which he completes to show his agreement to start the procedure of the internal defence. By signing this document, he states that the dissertation is ready for defence. He explains that there are no strict criteria and that different supervisors have different ones so he can only speak about his own. The most important thing he looks for is empirical material collected by the candidate him or herself. He emphasizes that using secondary sources or questionnaires without any fieldwork or field observations is inadmissible. This is important because he thinks this is the way to draw conclusions about the place of the observed phenomena in the societal structure. He also looks for is proficiency in English, which is, up to a point, confirmed by the language 'minimum' (examination taken during PhD studies). He adds that he considers a dissertation as a whole entity and that in this case, the dissertation can even be seen as a book almost ready for publication.

According to the Chair of the jury, there are 'formal criteria formulated by national authorities' which include following 'a clear [research] methodology'. She also thinks that the specifics of the discipline require PhD candidates to be 'objective' and to demonstrate having done 'strong fieldwork'. There is no grading system. All reviewers are required to state at the end of their review whether the candidate deserves to be awarded the degree or not. Although there are no strictly set criteria and candidates are not given marks by the reviewers, reviewers ask questions in their reviews which the candidate 'must answer' during the public defence.

Examiner I has had a long experience in reviewing PhD theses for different universities, including Sofia University and over the years she has developed her own approach, striking a balance between sticking to a set of strictly set criteria (she mentions that there is one university which requires such an approach) and a 'leisurely' way of going about it (her own institution). She feels that in this respect Sofia University is positioned somewhere in between. However, there are certain universal criteria, the first of which is the 'relevance of the topic, the applicability of the results', and this corresponds not only to national or institutional criteria but even to international ones. Next comes demonstration that the candidate has mastered the methodology of the discipline, demonstration of 'theoretical preparedness' ('which is the responsibility of the supervisor'), and the originality of the research. 'In between' comes the evidence that national standards have been met:

participation in academic forums, the required mandatory number of publications, which, to put it another way, is also a kind of approbation of the first results in front of a wider audience.

Last but not least comes the language used in the dissertation. She expects the text to be in an appropriate Bulgarian academic language which shows mastery of the discipline terminology. When writing a review, she intersperses it with critical remarks where appropriate but always finishes with the 'magical

formula' that 'on the basis of the above, we propose to the respected jury, to award the relevant degree of PhD in'. This evaluation is usually confirmed during the final defence:

It is expected that this is a preliminary opinion and a preliminary review, because as a result of the actual defence, a final opinion should be taken by the respected scientific jury.

The discussion with the candidate constitutes a significant reference point for meeting the criteria. Additional questions can be asked during the defence itself which can influence the decision of the jury. The candidate also said he was aware of this:

I'm ready not just for a friendly dialogue, for a praise . . . sorry for the word, but rather for a discussion, a scientific discussion, which on the one hand I think is quite normal to take place.

On the other hand, Examiner 1 has never heard 'of a case where what is described in the reviews has gone wrong', although 'the law provides that the defence is a process [and requires], that the jury must confirm or reject their initial opinion accordingly'.

Examiner 2 also mentions being acquainted with assessment grading scales, but this is not the case with Sofia University. Although, more or less, examiners are told what their reviews have to contain, they are not given strictly set assessment criteria. She considers the overall structure of the dissertation, the set aims and objectives and follows, if there is coherence between the set aims and the methods applied, if the results correspond to the aims. It is important, from the point of view of the discipline in question, to have serious fieldwork.

Examiner 3 agrees that all jury members stick to certain scientific criteria and adds to the aforementioned ones 'clarity about exactly what is being researched', 'how this is done', and 'what is the contribution of the researcher, of the dissertation'.

Examiner 4 confirms that although there is tacit understanding of criteria, jury members usually approach the assessment holistically. In her opinion, it is very important for PhDs to 'show how this research can actually be applied in practice and how it can be useful for solving specific problems in society' and this is something 'PhD students have been increasingly successful in recent years'.

Preparing questions

The Chair of the jury always prepares some questions apart from the ones in her review although she notes that this is not obligatory. She thinks questions are an important aspect of the defence and in order to give the opportunity to the rest of the jury to ask theirs, she limits them to three or four.

Examiner 1 does not have prepared questions for the candidate – neither in the review nor ones prepared for the final defence. Examiner 2 has included in her review questions formulated as ‘wishes’ to prompt the candidate ‘to add a few things’ because she considers the dissertation as a future book and she thinks this can only make the book more successful. She has not prepared questions to ask during the public defence. Examiner 3 has stated his opinion, critiques, and questions to the candidate in his review. He explains that there is no defence without questions and that some of them appear in the course of the candidate trying to answer the ones already posed and because ‘if he answers thoroughly and satisfactorily, everything is okay, but if something is not right, further questions are asked. But that’s a dialogue. Live dialogue is important’.

Examiner 4 has asked questions, in the sense of critique, at the internal defence and says that including questions in the review or during the final defence is nothing out of the ordinary, especially if she is genuinely interested in something and would like to get more details about a specific point.

Relationships among the participants

Candidate and supervisor

The candidate had expected the supervisor to detect the ‘smallest nuances’ of things which would need further development and says that this was done:

the supervisor was extremely useful, because the statement, the clarification, the specifics were very often precisely his work, sometimes more, sometimes very little. But always enough.

They last met in person after the internal defence when the supervisor gave the candidate ‘clear guidance’ and after that he has not felt the need of face-to-face communication although they have continued to exchange emails.

The supervisor describes working with the PhD as a well-time-managed process as a result of which they observed all required deadlines without ‘any hurry’ or ‘nervousness’ (often typical of the end of PhD studies). He acknowledges the candidates’ personal qualities and expertise several times during the interview. He explains that their department is characterized by extensive fieldwork during which academics and students have more time to communicate and get to know each other. He makes it a point to reassure the candidate that the critique heard during the internal defence is not taken to the public one: ‘there, the conditions are entirely different’. He is planning to go to the public defence ‘out of respect for the candidate’ and also because ‘we mutually treat each other’ after it to mark the occasion.

Examiners

The examiners have been invited to be part of the jury due to their professional qualities and research interests. The candidate considers them ‘specialists in

the relevant scientific discipline’, and, ‘given the specifics of my topic, maximally adequately selected . . . specialists before whom I am proud and grateful to appear as a jury for my work’.

All examiners speak about a certain administrative collaboration which has included preliminary discussions and exchanged emails with the head of the department and its secretary and with the Chair of the jury. Some of them have collaborated in other ways and on other occasions but what they consider key to the current defence procedure is their expertise (‘Of course I was invited because of my expertise as a professor of’ – Chair of the jury, ‘I’ve had offers that . . . I haven’t accepted, simply because I don’t feel like I’m expert enough in the issues’ – Examiner 3). The Chair of the jury mentions accepting this position also because she considers the dissertation especially innovative and, in this sense, necessary to the development of the academic discipline.

It is worth noting that after the first meeting during which the jury decides who the Chair will be and who will write what kind of review, they have not communicated with each other. They consider the upcoming defence ‘clear’ and do not have doubts or queries they would like to discuss with the rest of the jury before it.

Observation of the defence⁷

The defence takes place in a room (see Figure 14.1) at the second floor of the Rectorate – the main (and oldest) university building in the country, which is highly symbolic for not only Bulgaria’s academic tradition but also the country’s cultural life.

At 14:05, the defence starts almost on time, as the guests continue hustling around and taking their seats. The room seems small and not well suited for

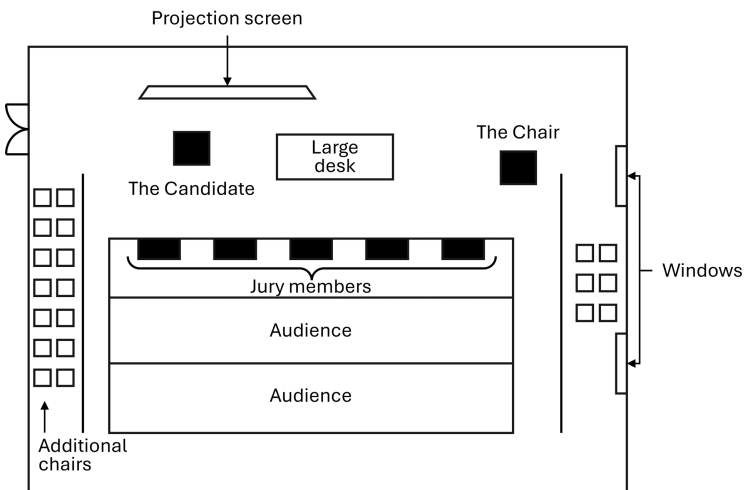


Figure 14.1 Layout of the examination room. ↵

similar events. Roughly estimated, it is about 40 square metres. The number of seats is much fewer than the actual number of people. Most of the room is filled with the benches which are situated horizontally to the left of the entrance. There are also three large desks in front of them. All of this makes for little free space in the room and creates the impression that the room is even smaller than it actually is. The room is packed with people. Most of them are sitting on the benches, but three people are standing and two are sitting on the edges of the room's two large windows, and many of the people present seem to feel uncomfortable.

There are 39 people in the room. Most of them look like guests and friends of the candidate. The majority are middle-aged, although there is one child and several students. They seem to be also from the department to which the candidate is affiliated.

The setting is completed by some clothes hanging next to the door. There is also some old computer equipment next to one of the walls. The room is extremely warm due to the excessive number of guests.

The candidate is a rather tall man, around 60 years old, with white hair. He is wearing a pink shirt and rather informal trousers, which make him look rather casually dressed and unrecognizable as 'the candidate' at first sight. Behind him there is a large whiteboard which is to be used for his PowerPoint presentation. Next to him there is a large desk on which there is a laptop. I guess the laptop is a bit old as it takes a bit of time to start the presentation.

Beside him, on the front row are sitting several people who seem to be the members of the jury. They are also dressed rather formally. There are four women and one man. The way in which they speak to each other suggests rather friendly and informal contacts. It only becomes evident that they are the members of the academic jury when a new entrant takes the floor and presents herself as the Chair of the committee.

At 14:15, the Chair starts by presenting the candidate and his educational background. She also lays out his professional history and academic interests, including his publications. She next presents the members of the jury and explains who among them have written long reports and who have written shorter reviews.

The candidate is then given the floor and first apologizes for the inconvenience caused by the inappropriate room. He then announces that he will be presenting his doctoral work done in the course of the last three years and thanks everyone for the support during his studies. He then dives into his topic and, by using the visual aid he had prepared for the event, he starts presenting the topic of his thesis.

The candidate looks confident, knowledgeable on the topic, and gives the impression of in-depth involvement with the subject. He speaks with confidence and has a deep voice. People listen with some concentration, but there is a slight feeling of physical discomfort in the room. Some people seem to be less concentrated and, for instance, one young man has his eyes closed and then starts rubbing them.

While this is happening, the door is open because of the stuffy air and one could hear voices from outside.

At 14:30, as the candidate speaks, the chair of the committee invites him to wrap up and to go into his concluding remarks, as he totally ignores the usual time limit of 20 minutes.

One of the people standing starts taking photos more intensely at that moment and the flash seems to cause discomfort for some of the people in the audience.

The members of the committee look tired as well, as one of them is looking down and yawning.

At 14:45, the candidate ends his presentation and the Chair takes the floor. She apologizes for interrupting the candidate and presents the other members of the jury. She gives the floor to a professor who moves to the front and sits next to the candidate. She starts speaking and waving intensely, takes off her glasses, and points out how high the quality of the education in their department is. She then speaks about the merits of the candidate and explains his contributions to the field. At the end of her intervention, she speeds up and makes the formal recommendation that the candidate be awarded the title of a doctor.

After this, chairs start moving in the little space available and a second member of the jury takes the floor. She is dressed quite informally and reiterates most of the words of the previous speaker. She is also very supportive of the candidate.

During all this time, no questions are asked. The examiners actually read the final part of their opinions on the dissertation. There are only two or three comments that could be interpreted as questions to which the candidate could answer later.

At 15:00, the third speaker is invited by the chair to take the floor. She is also rather informally dressed. She is the only member of the committee who is from another university and city in Bulgaria. In a rather informal way, she shares her experience in working with the candidate and recounts his three-year path of completing a doctoral degree.

At 15:15, the fourth speaker is invited by the Chair to take the floor. He is a full professor at Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and is quite formally dressed. He starts his intervention by telling some jokes related to the topic. The audience, however, looks tired and there are only a few smiles. A lot of the guests are looking at their phones and their enthusiasm seems to be fading. After around 15 minutes, the speaker also recommends the granting of the title of a doctor.

The fifth speaker is the Chair of the jury. She presents her opinion standing and talks about the merits of the candidate. Her statement is in a similar vein to the general spirit of the rest of the members of the 'jury'. She summarizes the overall conclusion of the committee members and also notes her support for the candidate.

At 15:30, the Chair now invites questions or comments from the audience. An older woman sitting in the audience asks to speak. She introduces herself

as a retired Professor of Law and starts by talking about an article of the candidate written for a journal whose editor-in-chief she is. Her voice is very loud and distinct; she talks with aplomb and a certain passion.

The Chair now invites the candidate to respond to the comments of the 'jury' and of the member of the audience who raised some questions. She remarks that the questions asked are very interesting, and she is looking forward to the reply. Then, the candidate welcomes the comments made by the committee members and talks at length again about his work.

After a few minutes, the Chair interrupts him mentioning the time constraints. She then asks for the opinion of all the members of the jury concerning the granting of the title of a doctor. All five confirm orally and with a show of hands in favour. The guests remain present during this procedure.

At 15:45, at the end, after the congratulations of the jury, there is very loud applause and everyone rushes towards the candidate to congratulate him. Everyone is cheering and makes encouraging gestures and noises. Finally, the supervisor makes a very personal address to the candidate and thanks him for the several years long collaboration. He also underlines that he is very much open to continuing projects with the candidate, since he is very happy with the outcome of his research spanning over several years.

The whole defence takes around 1 hour and 40 minutes.

The defence in retrospect

Candidate

The candidate says that he had expected the defence to be very successful because he had researched the topic even before becoming a PhD student. However, he had made an effort to behave as if it were a predetermined situation, where 'I just show up, say my words, and get my reward'.

At the beginning of the defence, he felt very excited, more than he had expected, despite his 'life experience'. He attributes this excitement to the fact that 'these three years' mean a lot to him and that he owes it to the people he had work with, to his current supervisor, and to the previous one. There was a certain level of discomfort due to some initial technical difficulties (which were overcome with the help of his wife) and also due to the fact that the public defence had attracted 'too many people', more than the room could seat comfortably. This uneasiness was quickly overcome because the candidate felt ready and 'simply . . . set in motion this readiness . . . [and allowed to show it] to the jury, to colleagues and to friends, relatives and the public in general'.

He did his best to present his dissertation over what he thinks was 25 to 30 minutes and is grateful that the jury, being 'tolerant', allowing him to continue instead of interrupting him after 20 minutes. On the whole, he felt the attitude of the jury and the audience made a 'very welcoming' atmosphere. There was nothing unexpected in the 'kind reactions' of the jury as their reviews had been made public before the defence, but the candidate emphasizes that all 'praises' were formulated 'in the appropriate academic tone' and were 'very

well-reasoned' as becoming a 'scientific jury' and a 'doctoral defence'. There were questions to the candidate, posed after the Chair reminded the jury that this is, 'after all, a defence', but he particularly remembers the questions of three of the members as they were 'especially deep' and allowed him 'to further clarify' certain aspects of his work. Asked if there were any significant differences in the questions asked, the candidate explained:

They asked the questions in relation to their own scientific interests, and perhaps also human interests. This is normal and, yes, there were differences and this made, I say it quite frankly, for me things even more interesting, because I wanted to feel the opportunity of different viewpoints on this work of mine, on the whole theme that I have taken up and developed.

Examiners

The Chair of the jury considers that carrying out defences in public is a good way to conclude one's PhD studies because it helps candidates understand the meaning of 'open science'. She explains that the defence in question 'followed the usual order': she started by introducing herself, the other jury members, and the candidate. Then, the candidate began his presentation, which in the Chair's opinion was 'well-illustrated' with photos and which were 'very important [informative] for the audience' who, unlike the jury, probably did not know the dissertation well. After that she gave the floor to the jury members to read their reviews, which was followed by questions to the candidate. The Chair pointed out two things which she thought might be considered slightly different from the standard procedure: the longer presentation given by the candidate which made it necessary for the reviews to be read aloud only in part and the fact that there was a question from the audience. The latter made an impression on all jury members as they also mention that a professor from another faculty, who happens to be on the editing board of a scholarly journal, was present at the defence and posed a question to the candidate. This was done because a paper written by the candidate and published in this journal demonstrates there are various, sometimes unexpected, lines of convergence between scientific disciplines.

Examiner 1 comments on the strong interest the defence created, 'which is extremely rare these days, perhaps because PhD defences take place during working hours' and as a whole she considers this 'a pleasant surprise'. Contrary to her expectations that the audience (mainly consisting of those whom the candidate had observed during fieldwork) would challenge the candidate, 'there was a really celebratory spirit of co-experiencing of something good that has happened, namely, an excellent research result'.

Apart from this and the longer (45 minutes in her opinion) presentation of the dissertation, there were no unexpected elements at the defence. This is confirmed by Examiner 3 and Examiner 2 who says 'I wouldn't say there were any unexpected twists in procedure, in the performative aspect of the

assessment, which is the public defence . . . as a stage performance as well. She emphasizes the 'relaxed', 'celebratory' atmosphere, and the fact that all participants 'felt at ease'.

The examiners comment on the supervisor's presence in this case and view it very positively. Two of them refer to experiences with other defences, saying that it is crucial for candidates because they can sometimes feel insecure and their supervisor's absence is even likely to have a negative influence on their behaviour. Examiner 1 is quite bitter when speaking about the recent change which means that supervisors cannot be a member of the examining committee: 'I don't like this pushing out of the role of the research supervisor . . . the supervisor sinks into the shadows'. The supervisor deserves a more prominent role because he/she stands behind the doctoral student with his name and position, and his expertise [and this] is already some kind of guarantee for compliance with the standards of science.

Supervisor

The supervisor was surprised by the number of people who turned up – he thinks there were around 50 – while the usual case is for 10 to 15 to be present. He had expected between 20 and 30 people but definitely not that many. He was surprised to see two professors of other subject areas.

He was also surprised by the length of the candidate's presentation. He talked for 44 minutes, twice as long as the recommended time – which the supervisor considers a mistake by the candidate. As a result, the Chair had to suggest the jury members should read only parts of their reviews. In his opinion despite the longer presentation everything went really well. His evaluation is that the candidate 'had a grip on the audience' and that the presentation was visually well prepared and 'professional'. At the end, the supervisor took the floor to thank the PhD for their collaboration and to assure him he can turn to him in the future:

As a supervisor, you are expected to take the floor twice – once, if you have to defend the doctoral student, but in this case there was no need for that. And the second is to accept thanks and say kind words, but because the procedure was prolonged, I said exactly one sentence. I even remember it – it was a pleasure to work with you. I hope we'll go on, period.

The candidate says that he felt his supervisor's support:

He was present, he was even physically close, in one of the first seats 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.

He also says that his supervisor's brief statement at the end was 'absolutely sufficient' for him. This confirms Examiner 1's view that the supervisor is the one 'who helps build a bridge' in the course of a PhD's studies. Therefore,

his presence is necessary at the final defence regardless of the qualities of the dissertation. Examiner 3 says that it was not by chance that at the end they ‘congratulated not only the candidate, but his supervisor as well’.

Awarding the title

Examiner 1 points out that the defence was ‘a perfect procedure’ compliant with the regulations. She uses again her metaphor from the pre-defence interview about the ‘magic formula’ when she refers to declaring the title at the end of the defence. It is ‘a magic formula’, because the subject area, the professional field or science, the doctoral programme must be clearly stated for the record. Examiner 2 reinforces this point:

The Chair of the jury invited each one [jury member] personally . . . in a loud voice, to say his decision whether he confirms . . . that was the wording – whether he confirmed his vote and what it was [the decision].

Examiner 3 adds that at the end, apart from stating their opinion ‘out loud’, each jury member ‘declares they have not detected plagiarism and they have no conflict of interest’ and explains that the assessment is encoded in the phrase ‘I vote positively’ or ‘I do not vote positively’. In this case, all jury members voted positively. They all say there was no reason for them to have discussions about the outcome of the defence before the actual procedure and that they were confident about the success of public defence which had already been announced in their reviews.

Finally, Examiner 2 emphasizes that the procedure of public defence is also a test for examiners and their competence, not just an experience in assessing a dissertation.

Next steps

All who were interviewed expressed their expectations that the dissertation will be turned into a monograph and published. The supervisor even thinks that such a book will gain a wider audience if it is published not by an academic publishing house and that due to its theme, this book has the potential to attract more diverse readers than the usual patrons of the university book shop. The candidate has thought about publishing the dissertation too, but he is also considering options to look for opportunities to continue in the academic sphere.

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Notes

- 1 The Bulgarian term for defence is the translation of 'defence' – защита, in the Regulations, several times it is also call 'public defence' – публична защита.
- 2 <https://lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2135680028>
- 3 Three years for full-time PhD students, four years for part-time doctoral students and no specific regulation for self-funded unsupervised doctoral students for whom there are specific regulations as well mostly concerning the process and not the content requirements for the dissertation.
- 4 Regulations on the conditions and procedures for acquiring scientific degrees and academic positions at Sofia University, Art. 67(2).
- 5 Professors or associate professors with academic positions in the higher education system of the country.
- 6 Since 2019, a special stage after submission of the dissertation for discussion of its readiness to the department is the plagiarism check as a necessary discriminative procedure enabling a further positive decision.
- 7 The observation was conducted and reported by Branimir Stanimirov, who finished his MA and PhD studies at universities outside Bulgaria and was not acquainted with the specifics of the PhD degree at Sofia University.