

The Experience of ‘Defending’ the Doctoral Dissertation

International Comparative Studies of the
Final Oral Examination

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Chapter 16

A case study of the PhD defence at the University of Trieste, Italy

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16 A case study of the PhD defence at the University of Trieste, Italy

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The Regulatory Framework

In Italy, the *Dottore di ricerca* ('research doctorate') was introduced in the 1980s, and it is still common for some 'full professors . . . not to have a doctorate' (supervisor A).

The regulations for the degree were first established with the Decree of the President of the Republic of 11 July 1980, n. 382, titled *Reorganization of university teaching, related training as well as organizational and didactic experimentation*.¹ The first doctoral programmes were listed in the 1982 Decree of the President of the Republic from 20 September 1982² and the first PhD training started in 1983. Further legal acts and regulations at the state level are presented in the 2009/2010 Eurydice Report on Italian education.³ They concern issues such as defining the fundamental objectives and general criteria, setting up and organizing doctoral training, selecting candidates, and awarding scholarships.

The University of Trieste offers PhD training in various branches of the sciences and humanities. The regulations and procedures, including the thesis and admission to the defence,⁴ are outlined in university-level regulations, which are in line with the relevant national regulations. The ones pertinent to our case are outlined in the *Regolamento in materia di Dottorato di Ricerca*⁵ and an English version is provided, *Regulation regarding Research Doctorates*,⁶ from which we take the terminology later. The Regulations also apply to cases when the PhD programme is jointly offered by two universities.

Each doctoral programme is governed by a coordinator and its own Teaching Board,⁷ which consists of at least 12 and not more than 35 members – scholars active in the field of the PhD programme – and at least half of them must be first- or second-level tenured university professors. The Teaching Board has a number of responsibilities among which are taking decisions about each PhD project, evaluating PhD students' activities, selecting thesis referees, and proposing the members of the final Board of Examiners or 'commission', the latter being appointed by Rector's decree.⁸

The title of *Dottore di Ricerca*, abbreviated to '*Dott. Ric.*' or 'PhD', is awarded after passing a 'final exam', also referred to as *viva voce* in the English

version of the regulations, during which the candidate must demonstrate that he/she has obtained results of a significant scientific value and originality, contributing to the advancement of knowledge or methodologies in the chosen research field.⁹ In order to defend their thesis, a candidate must first be admitted to the *Referees' assessment* and, following positive assessments or assessments suggesting 'minor revisions',¹⁰ the candidate may progress to the defence.

The thesis must be written either in Italian or in English and accompanied by an abstract in Italian or English, respectively. Submitting a PhD thesis in another language is subject to approval by the Teaching Board.

Theses are submitted for assessment through a dedicated online system and are reviewed by at least two referees 'of high scientific standing' appointed by the Teaching Board. The thesis must be accompanied by a report by the doctoral student on activities carried out during the course and on any publications completed during the training programme.

The process of identifying reviewers or referees is described in Article 14 of the regulations.¹¹ As part of the supervisor's obligations, he or she

proposes to the Teaching Board, after having verified in advance their availability in relation to the methods and timescales envisaged, at least two teachers or experts and a highly qualified substitute who will have to evaluate the doctoral student's thesis for the purposes of admission to the final exam.

The referees have to be external to the PhD programme, the university and the research activities undertaken by the candidate. They have 30 days to express an opinion on the thesis in a written form and to propose admission to its defence or, if they deem significant additions or corrections to the thesis necessary, the postponement of the discussion for a period not longer than six months. After this period, the thesis, accompanied by a new written opinion provided by the referees, is admitted to a defence at the first available session. The Teaching Board, in exceptional cases of evident assessment errors, can decide on admission to the defence even if a thesis has received negative reviews.

Before the defence, the doctoral thesis is deposited in the institutional archive of the university and in the National Libraries of Rome and Florence, as well as in the Ministry of Education database. Supervisor A explained that this equates with having published a monograph under a Creative Commons licence.

The defence is public and is held before a Board of Examiners who can be chosen from tenured professors and researchers of the university, of other Italian or foreign universities, research managers, researchers, or similar roles in public research bodies or among experts with proven qualifications. The committee of examiners shall consist of three to five members. At least two-thirds of the members must be university professors and in the case of a single-site doctorate, two-thirds of the examiners must not be affiliated to the university.

The referees can be appointed as examiners but supervisors cannot, 'except in cases of co-supervision of thesis, if provided for by the relevant agreement'. The Board of Examiners is given online access to the thesis, abstract, report on research activity, referees' reviews 20 days before the final exam.

Before the defence

Submitting the thesis for review – views of candidates and supervisors

The case at the University of Trieste comprises two defences under the same PhD programme, which is jointly offered by the University of Trieste and another Italian university. The teachers involved in the programme belong to the two universities, but it is administered at Trieste and complies with its regulations. Each of the two candidates has two supervisors who are not professors from the University of Trieste, and three of them belong to the partner university while one is from another Italian HEI. Data here were collected from one supervisor for each candidate. The two PhDs appear on the same day before the same Examination Board of four examiners external to the two universities offering the doctoral programme.

Candidates for the doctoral examination must submit their thesis observing pre-defined deadlines common for the whole university. Supervisor A explains that writing a thesis is a 'gradual process' in which the supervisor closely follows the development of the text and a supervisor does not need a long time to read the text before the submission for final assessment. He adds that students are monitored by their supervisors every six months and that at the end of every year their work is assessed by the Teaching Board. The students' decision whether their work is ready for submission in both cases was taken to meet the university deadlines and was coordinated with the supervisor. ('I talk about almost every decision I make', candidate B.) Both candidates were eager to finish the process of their doctoral education, candidate A having already used the opportunity to prolong his study period because the COVID-19 pandemic limited his opportunities to do field research. Candidate A said, however, that, given an opportunity to extend this period even further, he would do it.

It is possible to prolong the normal three-year period for other reasons, for example, because of an illness or if a student has 'difficulties of a psychological nature' or after realizing a research project 'is unfeasible or that he no longer likes it' a student 'can ask for an extension in order to review and restart (their) research' (supervisor B).

Supervisor A explains that there is no specific format for written approval for submission, but Supervisor B says that 'there are practices' and he explains that he tries to keep to a certain type of formulation when he grants his approval to different students he is supervising.

In fact, there exists a 'Supplementary form for the final exam' which is submitted with the thesis and must be signed by both the student and the

supervisor. It serves as evidence that the doctoral student meets all the requirements to defend their work, for example, is up to date with attendance, has paid all due taxes and contributions, declares that the content and organization of the thesis is original work, and does not compromise in any way the rights of third parties.

Significant for admission to the final exam is the validity and originality of the work. 'the doctorand . . . the student, no matter how we want to call him, should present scientifically valid work in the opinion of the tutors who supervise it, the assessors, and of some external referees' (supervisor B).

Preparation for the defence

Candidates

Both candidates say that they have started working as secondary schoolteachers, and they will not have time to prepare for the defence 'a lot', only the very last weekend before the defence will be dedicated to preparation. At the same time, they do not seem to be really worried by this. They describe their state of mind as 'calm' and 'relaxed', and think the efforts they are investing are 'enough', because 'this is the work that I wrote, that I know and I like anyway' (Candidate B). Although the candidates mention some apprehension, they do not expect to be turned down at the final stage due to the positive reviews they have already received:

They cannot tell you 'No' during the final exam, because the first review has been passed already . . . and I have certain positive feelings because in particular one of the two first reviews was really good and it was written by one of the most important professors in [the field]. I am so happy that this professor will correct me, because when he makes corrections it is always to improve, but never, let me say, in order to confront another person.

(Candidate A)

Candidate B also says that the defence is supposed to bring 'a bit of a closure'.

Candidates have general knowledge about the process and how the event will be conducted because they have attended other defences.

I have to give a speech for a quarter of an hour, let us say 20 minutes, to present my thesis. And then there is a phase of comments from the discussants and questions (Candidate B).

When asked about the option of preparing a computer presentation, they are both sure in advance that they will prepare some PowerPoint slides.

The candidates have not received any concrete guidance on how to behave during the defence, neither from their supervisors nor from the university administration: 'no one is going to tell you what is the procedure' (Candidate B). They have only been notified by 'an e-mail with basically 3 lines' about the

time and place of the defence (Candidate A). One of the candidates says that he has not heard from his supervisor for quite some time and thinks that it is not necessary to 'receive any guidance', because the thesis is just like a master's thesis, only 'bigger' (Candidate A). The other supervisor has provided only encouraging words to his supervisee – 'you can be calm, because your work is good quality' (Candidate B).

Supervisors

The supervisors are not part of the examination committee, as noted earlier. Both supervisors are quite confident in the quality of the theses and are not planning to attend the defence themselves although their presence would not contradict the regulations:

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

(Supervisor A)

Supervisor B also said it is a personal choice, and he does not want his presence 'to be perceived as a way to influence the examining committee' and explains this as a tradition:

In our university tradition, a person who manages to do scientifically valid work is capable. There is no need for anyone to explain to him how he should talk about his work. He is adult enough and mature enough to do it on his own. This is what we normally think in Italy.

(Supervisor B)

This is reinforced by Supervisor A who speaks of preparing for the defence in general:

I would refuse to prepare questions in advance, because the candidate must be able to independently answer any questions asked about the work he is presenting.

(Supervisor A)

Examiners

THE PURPOSE OF THE DEFENCE

In general, the examiners¹² state that they are quite experienced in assessing doctoral theses, and they have done this many times before. Two of them state that, being now retired (but having the right to participate in such exams), they have even more time to do so.

When asked about the purpose of the defence in this case, the examiners seem to be of similar opinions. Examiner 1 thinks that the purpose of the defence is to provide an opportunity to discuss with the candidates what he as a specialist considers the weak and strong points of the theses and to listen to their arguments in a manner of 'a dialogue', after which, 'as a commission, we will establish what the assessment is that will be given to the work'. He also explains that this leads to the final decision about the thesis – 'we decide, we decide between us, but it ends there'.

Examiner 2 is of the opinion that the purpose of the final defence of the candidates is to 'ascertain their overall preparation by teachers who have not been part of the respective doctorates to which the candidates belong', that is, assessed from the outside, objectively.

Examiner 3 expects to see that the candidates 'know how to submit the work that has been done to the scrutiny of scholars . . . how to defend the choices he made by arguing'.

Reading the thesis

The examiners received an electronic copy of the texts which they read and prepared notes, questions, and/or comments on, which they intend to use during the defence.

Examiner 1 says he was given the two theses a month before the actual defence and started reading them immediately, while another said he started reading the theses two weeks prior to the final exam. However, these approaches differ from what was said by the third examiner who had been originally a 'substitute': 'They sent it (the electronic copy) in the last few days after I learned that I will be going to the place . . . unfortunately I was given one week in advance'. Despite this short notice, Examiner 3 'luckily' did not have other commitments and deadlines to meet and was able to dedicate all his time to reading the theses.

The process of getting acquainted with the theses texts also seems to be similar for all, with examiners taking notes on the important aspects. They are looking for evidence of the candidates' ability to use the specific methodological tools of the scientific field and to refer to and make the most of the available sources.

They read the theses carefully, 'both out of respect for young scholars and because, as I am no longer in service, I have a lot of free time and no academic commitments' (Examiner 2). Examiner 3 would rather read the thesis on paper and is not very happy that she has received it only in an electronic version.

But I still take notes. . . . With the main ones on a notepad. In short, I take some notes gradually and then after returning, in short after having done a reading, after returning to the text maybe I give a general reading and well, if I had the paper I would put some post-it notes.

(Examiner 3)

While reading, the examiners also prepare the questions they are going to ask during the defence as well as certain recommendations. In Examiner 3's words in this way, she aims 'to learn more about or, in short, to solicit the intervention of the candidate's response'.

Criteria

The examiners are not required to submit their assessment of the thesis in written form in advance. The Board of Examiners or Commission meet in private after the defence. The thesis is then approved or rejected with a written summary judgement which contains grounded arguments. The Board of Examiners, with a unanimous vote, can award honours if they consider the research has reached results of particular scientific importance. In case of a negative result, the final exam cannot be repeated.¹³

Although the respondents do not point to specific formalized assessment criteria, they believe that the subject field itself guides the assessment process as there are well-established rules of what is considered quality research in this field:

The formal criteria essentially concern the quality of the research carried out, the knowledge of historiography, the analytical examination of the sources, the capacity for critical elaboration and the correctness of the narrative structure of the thesis.

(Examiner 2)

The History methodology is very, very formalised in this sense and therefore the thesis topics, themes, things etc. change, but the type of comparison that I am responsible for as examiner is more or less always constructed in the same way.

(Examiner 1)

I ensure that the topic has been included in the historiographical debate, therefore that there is a reference to literature, at least to the main works that concern the specific topic that is the subject of the doctor's thesis. And then then. . . . How is the thesis developed, the archival work, how are the sources treated . . . a historian must also write well.

(Examiner 3)

When asked about the assessment criteria, the supervisors also say that they are not aware of formalized criteria and that examiners make an overall assessment of the thesis, but they have in mind 'an overall balance between these different aspects – linguistic clarity, expressive clarity, but above all correctness of the working method and originality of the results . . . strictly scientific criteria' (supervisor B).

Relationships among the participants

In our case, the examiners were not engaged as 'referees', and they were invited only as members of the Board of Examiners. The supervisors and examiners explain the process of selecting the members of the Board of Examiners as one that is guided mostly by their field of expertise. This is confirmed by the second and the third examiner: 'I was invited by a colleague from [the programme] and I gladly accepted' (Examiner 2). 'I was invited by my colleague. . . . So, first part, let's say informal, then a formal part' (Examiner 3). The same information is given by supervisor A:

the doctor's supervisor . . . they make proposals. Let's say, the supervisor asks for [the examiner's] availability and it is not a legal obligation to accept. . . . We try, let's say, to identify, let's say, people expert enough in the object of the thesis.

Supervisor B explains in a similar way, saying that these examiners were invited because they are 'among the best Italian historians' and adds that people in a specific field know each other because there are not many in Italy.

The selection process is not known to the candidates – both are hesitant to say how examiners are chosen. The only assumption they feel confident about is that they are of course chosen because of the similar academic field they are engaged in.

The referees and the examiners are 'university professors external to the doctorate', 'external to the teaching body' (supervisor B). However, the candidates may have been in contact with them either during their previous studies or because they have attended courses led by these external professors, since it is possible to attend courses outside the ones provided by the programme if this is considered useful to developing the thesis. They may also be acquainted with the examiners' work, be it due to attending conferences or reading their publications.

The candidates themselves talk about knowing some of the examiners through their previous studies or because they are an authority in their field of study. Although they do not think all the examiners specialize in exactly their research fields, nonetheless they expect to be asked some questions and be given recommendations:

I know I will receive many, many, many, many questions and I know it will be really, really nice, really interesting because he's a gentleman, he's a fine person and he only wants to improve the PhD work.

(Candidate A)

The first supervisor mentions the role of the chair or 'President' of the Board of Examiners several times in the interview. He says that the President can impose certain rules, for example, how long the candidate's presentation will

take or what to wear to the public defence: ‘The President decides whether he himself and therefore also the Commissioners must wear a gown or not’. Another role of the President is to sign the certificate of success in the examination, issued right after the examination is finished.

Examiner 3 has taken on this role and explains that there is one more mandatory ‘position’ on the examination board that of the secretary. Retired members cannot take on either of these roles, and this is how the roles were distributed in this case as two of the other examiners are retired professors.

Both the supervisors and the examiners talk about the complementary expertise of the examiners: two of them are specialists in exactly the topics that are being defended and two have expertise not so closely related to the studied themes but are also reputable scholars.

In the discipline in question, the number of academics is small and they inevitably know each other but no one mentions having discussed the qualities of the submitted theses, nor those of the candidates prior to the defence. To do so would be considered trying to influence the outcome. The examiners say that they form their opinions independently, and this is highlighted by supervisor B:

in our university tradition it can be interpreted as an attempt to force judgment. Let’s say, for example, ‘Look’ because we normally know each other. . . . So, telling a friend ‘I have a very good student, give him a high rating’. It would be a way to influence the work of the Commission. Even if I talk to friends, they have to form an opinion on their own about my student’s work.

The defence

The regulatory framework

Defences are held twice each academic year (once in the autumn semester and once in the spring semester), and there is an ‘extraordinary’ session open to candidates who have been granted extensions due to COVID-19 (still valid for the academic year 2022–2023) or other exemptions granted such as leave of absence or health exemptions.

The Board of Examiners appoints a Chairperson from among its members and a Secretary.

At the end of the public defence, the Board of Examiners meet without the candidates or members of the public present to hold a final discussion about the thesis. As a result, the thesis is approved or rejected with a written summary judgement which contains grounded arguments. The Board, with a unanimous vote, can award honours in the presence of results of particular scientific importance. In case of a negative result, the defence cannot be repeated.

Observation of the defence

The building where the defence is held is far away from the Rectorate. There is no indication that this is where the defence will take place, but it has been announced on the university website.

The first person to arrive is one of the two candidates. He arrives together with a girl of a similar age who is later introduced as his girlfriend.

The room (see Figure 16.1) where the event takes place looks like a standard classroom with seven rows with eight connected seats in each, equipped with a blackboard, a computer and a multimedia projector. On the same level, there is a table with some water in plastic bottles for the examiners. Initially, there are no additional chairs arranged between this table and the blackboard.

The beginning as announced on the university web page is to be at 9:00, but only the two candidates accompanied by their friends are present at this time.

A few minutes before the start a woman who seems to be part of the faculty administration asks the candidate who had come first to help her with arrangements. He then brings four chairs from another room and puts them in front of the blackboard. This is necessary as the seats and desks in the room are fixed to the floor. There is an ongoing discussion between them as they do this, as the candidate is worried that there will be no space for the examiners

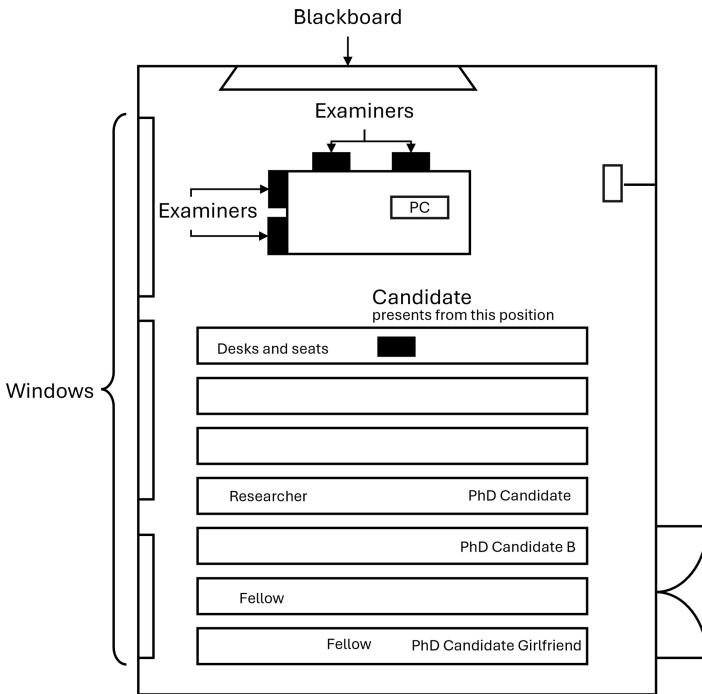


Figure 16.1 Layout of the examination room. ↵

to write. In fact, there is only one desk with a monitor on it, and it will not allow the examiners to use the desk surface to put a book, paper, and write if they want. Another discussion is about if and how it will be possible to make a PowerPoint presentation. Surprisingly for the candidate who is asking, the woman answers that there will be no need to use a PowerPoint presentation, talking will be enough.

Meanwhile, between 9:02 and 9:10, the examiners start to arrive. There will be four in total, three men and one woman. Each time when someone arrives, they shake hands individually with the others who are already present in the room. The first two examiners, men, arrive. The person from the administration starts to explain an administrative issue. It looks as if there is a system where the examiners must be registered or something like this and should insert their comments, assessments, etc. One of the examiners says that he is not registered. My presence is announced as well. I am briefly introduced to the examiners by the administrator: what the reason for my attendance is and what my academic institution is. I am sitting in the middle of the rows, not too close to the examiners to distract them, and not too far to hear the conversation between the candidates and the examiners. One of the candidates is sitting in the same row.

The other two examiners enter, one male one female. They introduce themselves to the other examiners and to the candidates by their name, and it seems that this is the first time they have met in person.

None of the supervisors is present.

The dress code may be described as moderately informal and compatible with the high temperatures during this time of the year in Trieste. Both candidates are wearing casual shirts and jeans, one with a casual jacket. Examiners wear casual but elegant clothes. The woman examiner has a simple white short-sleeved blouse and trousers; one of the male professors is wearing a classical suit and tie. Members of the public are wearing informal youth-style clothes.

At 9:15, a person who looks like a technician from the university arrives. He tries unsuccessfully to switch on the slide projector. The first candidate, who has a presentation prepared, is asked if he really needs video, but he seems to decide not to insist on waiting for this and says no.

The atmosphere is informal, and the candidates do not seem nervous. They are quietly exchanging jokes with each other, and from time to time they are leafing through their printed theses. The way in which examiners are speaking to each other and to the candidates is also informal. None of them is discussing the theses, or anything related to the upcoming defences. The examiners are chatting informally about things like personal travel. Laughter can be heard, instead of tenseness or a ceremonial atmosphere. Only certain tiny details may suggest that in the room there are two people about to defend their theses. These two people move about – they go in and out of the room several times, when in the room, they stand or sit at their desk, read their notes quietly, or scroll through their phones.

The examiners discuss who of them is going to be the Chairperson and agree that the role will be given to the woman examiner.

After the examiners gather together, the audience is asked to leave the room. While the candidates, the public, and the woman from the administration are waiting, she tries to motivate them and calm them with some empathetic words: that this is the end of their 3–4 years of academic efforts and that they will have a great chance to meet the examiners and to hear and receive their professional feedback. It becomes evident that the members of the Board of Examiners belong to different academic areas. Two are professors in Contemporary History, two have expertise in Early Modern History, one with a specific focus on institutions.

Everybody except for the administrative representative, returns to the room.

At 9:30, the first candidate sits in the first row opposite the examiners. The second candidate sits with the public. The woman examiner introduces herself as chosen to be the Chairperson of the examiners. She opens the defence by reading the name of the first candidate and the title of his thesis. The candidate has three hardbound copies of the thesis and gives them to the examiners.

He starts his presentation with the objectives of the thesis and then explains what the different chapters contain. All are listening without interruption. Two of the examiners have brought with them their written notes and while the candidate is talking, they are adding additional notes. One of the examiners is simultaneously reading the thesis. The duration of the candidate's speech is 12 minutes.

The examiners start asking their questions right after the candidate stops. The sequence of turns seems to be spontaneously defined, depending on the seating position, not according to a specific role, hierarchy, or academic expertise.

Each examiner talks for around 10 minutes, and the candidate takes notes while listening.

It can be described as more or less a constructive encouraging conversation ('It is not a criticism but sharing the same challenge' says one of the examiners), rather than asking questions to examine the knowledge of the candidate. The examiners talk about their impressions gained while reading the thesis. They not only give positive feedback and recommendations for enriching the bibliography but also provide their knowledge related to the topic.

One of the examiners recommends publication. Another explicitly announces that he is not an expert in this period and will comment only on the general academic quality. All are positive, smiling, and even exchanging jokes which arise from the academic examples. Finally, the candidate has a few minutes to address all the questions of the examiners.

In total, the first defence takes one hour. The audience is passive, and there is only brief applause after the candidate finishes his reply.

At 10:30, the Chair of the Board of Examiners announce that there is going to be a break before starting with the second candidate's defence.

During the break both candidates, together with their friends, are chatting in the corridor. On the other side, the examiners are talking to each other in the room with an open door. Topics are not specifically academic.

At 10:40, the second defence starts.

The candidate sits in the first row of desks opposite the four examiners. He has four soft-bound copies of his thesis and gives one copy to each examiner.

He immediately starts his presentation with the objective of the thesis and then goes through details chronologically. He has some notes on paper in front of him. The presentation lasts approximately 10 minutes.

While listening to the candidate, the examiners are looking through the copies. Then, again, the examiners start one by one their oral comments. They act quite similarly to each other in a very polite and positive way, initiating their speech with sharing thoughts, reading their notes, and asking questions. The order in which they talk seems this time to depend on their academic expertise.

One of the examiners says that he has identified a discrepancy in the thesis, but due to lack of time he has not re-read the text to search for clarification. The examiners use encouraging words to describe the thesis, asking mostly general questions about the personal motivation of the candidate to dedicate his work to the specific area, the reasons for the chosen methodology, sharing recommendations, rather than asking difficult or challenging questions. Each examiner speaks for about 10 minutes. The candidate takes notes on what is being said and answers the questions immediately after the last examiner has finished. His responses take about 8 minutes.

At 11:30, both candidates and the audience are requested to leave the room because the Board of Examiners will need to discuss the defences.

In the corridor, the candidates are in an easy-going mood, again joking and having a typical post-examination chat. I am also part of their talk, not only listening but also asking them about their attitude after the defence. Both answer that nothing unexpected has happened up to this moment.

However, at one point, the candidates start to doubt, not worried, only wondering why it takes so long for the examiners to discuss. Their friends start comparing with their own defences.

One of the examiners leaves the room to clarify that the issue is not with the decision, but they are struggling with some technical aspects trying to fill in information on the system.

At 12:00, we are invited back.

Both candidates stand in front of the Examiners, near to where they were sitting while presenting their thesis, while listening to the Board's decision.

The Chairperson makes the same announcement about both candidates separately, and after each the public applauds. The statement sounds like a routine standard expression to announce that each candidate is appraised with 'excellent' and from now on is a Doctor of Human and History Science.

This part of the event ends quite quickly. The candidates and their friends leave the room. The examiners exchange words about what their next steps should be: to go to find the room where they need to sign the report.

The defence in retrospect

At the end of the examination, the Board of Examiners issues a certificate of success in the defence, signed by the appointed Chairperson.

In the current case, after the official part has ended, the examiners go to a room in the same building, most probably in the office of the administrator who initially was present before the defence, where they shall sign a statement, 'that the candidate has successfully passed the exam'.

Then at a future moment, the original diploma shall be awarded by the Rector and delivered during the proclamation ceremony, 'Graduation Day'. The date of the event is about to be published on the website.

Candidates

Candidate A said he had not prepared before the defence apart from drafting some notes and putting them in logical order on the way to Trieste the night before and trying to memorize them just before the start of the defence. But when he got to the place, 'a bit of tension arrived . . . more than anything else because I became somewhat aware of the fact that it was really about to happen'.

He was not surprised by the questions he was asked. The examiner who specializes in the field of his research made more specific comments, while the ones who are not so directly involved in the topic made more general ones. As a whole, the candidate was pleased with the defence admitting that although he had expected it to go well, in reality it exceeded his positive expectations. He felt 'very happy' that the comments he received sounded like 'positive criticisms, i.e. things to explore or add' and that the methodology used was not questioned and 'they found no deficiencies in the works I cited'.

He received a recommendation to publish his thesis and the biggest encouragement came from one of the examiners who is an expert in the researched topic, and this was highly appreciated by the candidate.

The second candidate confessed that he felt anxious at the beginning of the defence ('the whole organization made me a little anxious') and that it was probably visible to others when he started his presentation, but then gradually he regained confidence ('and my anxiety went away'). He thought the examiners' approach was very constructive and calm and that helped with regaining confidence. His expectation to be asked 'profound' questions, based on his knowing the work of the examiners, was justified – 'I expected . . . a deep analysis of the thesis and actually and in reality there was'.

He shared a detail about having actually met one of the examiners before at a conference but, when asked if he felt a lesser degree of formality in his addressing the candidate, he said that despite the less formal approach, this examiner was also 'very precise' in his comments.

In terms of what they had not expected, the degree of positive final assessment was something surprising to both candidates as the Board of Examiners unanimously announced that they have defended their theses with 'Excellent':

They talked to me about publishing the thesis which in Italy is something that is not done often. It means that they really liked the thesis. I honestly didn't expect this much, that's it.

(Candidate A)

I'm happy with the praise that I didn't expect. When they said let's say the final vote, the final grade.

(Candidate B)

For Candidate A, publishing seems worthwhile because of the time and effort invested in developing the thesis. He considers one of the examiners more interested in supporting him to prepare the text for publication not only because he is an expert but also because he has a position as a series editor on the research topic and this might be helpful in funding the publication.

The second candidate was also recommended to publish his thesis but thought this is something to do at a later point in time as the most important thing to deal with currently was his new job as a teacher.

Supervisors

As was already mentioned, the supervisors have no direct role in the defence and they had chosen not to be present. Both supervisors had already discussed the defence with their students by the time of the interview.

Supervisor A says that the viva 'seems to have gone very well' and that he feels 'happy' with the final result. He thinks that the final oral examination is 'also useful, perhaps to verify that he actually wrote it [the thesis]'. He 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.

Asked about his role as a supervisor after the defence, supervisor B says:

There are no responsibilities, so my role is what I have already told you, absolutely informal. If Dr X, as a young scholar, thinks he will continue to work and if he believes that a contact with me could be useful to him, I'm available this way.

Supervisor B says that he has discussed with the student what happened during the defence and comments on the different types of questions asked relating them to their area of research expertise. The result has exceeded his expectations, especially the invitation to the student to publish the thesis as a monograph: 'This is very flattering, that is, to essentially print a book and this is very flattering on both sides [for the student and for the supervisor]'. He has told the student that he can 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. In this sense, he expresses some regret that the student currently seems more focused on his new job as a secondary schoolteacher than on his role as a researcher, adding that in two years' time it will be really difficult to try to become a member of Italian academia.

In general, he thinks that in this particular case the defence served its purpose 'to discuss the scientific quality of the work', but he mentions that there might be other approaches: 'other possibilities to use the same instrument in a distorted way if the Commission and the universities are interested above all in advertising themselves'.

Examiners

The defence and the post-examination discussion

Although the theses had already been positively reviewed, the examiners said they read the theses very carefully and prepared some questions, notes, and comments which they raised at the defence in order 'to learn more about or, in short, to solicit the intervention of the candidate's response'. As Examiner 3 says, 'Here, this is a bit of the way I've operated . . . , which more or less also seems to be the same way my colleagues do'.

The Board of Examiners did not have difficulty deciding to give a very high mark to both candidates, as the examiners were convinced of the academic merit of the theses:

However, being, let's say, two very good works, there wasn't a great contrast, there weren't many discussions, they agreed to give both [candidates] praise'.

(Examiner 3)

The Commission was absolutely consistent. In the reports, and among those who were here, there was no discussion among the members.

(Examiner 1)

The examiners expressed a general satisfaction with the results of the defence. Examiner 3 explained that it 'is not an exam as an exam, but a bit of discussion' confirming what was said before the defence took place: that the candidates 'defended their thesis . . . but being two very good theses, there were more comments than criticisms'. Examiner 1 confirms this view by saying that the 'excellent' result 'really comes out of a well-done thesis' adding that 'the professional ability of a student in his career is perfectly recognised'.

The examiners share the opinion that this form of a final oral examination is appropriate as it logically builds up on the first step, that is, the two independent referees' assessment:

it seems to me that it is adequate, in the sense that the person has done a job, a written job. It's right and it seems good to me that you also present it on an oral level. Then you discuss the results with a commission.

(Examiner 3)

it was a matter of hearing the candidates' voice, the ability to also explain from their thesis, which they both did with great clarity.

(Examiner 1)

Next steps

Both candidates say there will be a ceremony at which the new doctors will officially receive their diplomas. However, they consider it not mandatory and do not plan to be present:

I really don't think I'll be able to go because it's in the middle of the week and I work, so I can't get permission to go to Trieste. So I'll then have to collect my diploma at another time from the secretariat.

(Candidate A)

Candidate B refers to the obtaining of the diploma as something like a formality, something you would 'keep at home' because he can make a formal declaration about having been awarded the title if necessary.

As far as their future prospects are concerned, the two candidates have different plans. While Candidate B seems determined that he is not interested in searching for an academic position, at the same time he will not stop looking for opportunities to publish his work. Candidate A says that at the moment being part of the academia does not provide the 'stability' he needs. However, he will be looking for opportunities to continue pursuing such a career in the future: 'I'll try to find some postdocs, though, perhaps with long contracts, postdocs perhaps lasting 5 or 6 years . . . with European funds, etc. I will try to win these postdocs here and there'.

In conclusion, the participants' evaluation of the defence, both tacitly and explicitly stated, is that the thesis defence is not essential for ending the PhD education. At first, they say that it is not the crucial part, and then, perhaps as loyalty to the system, they start explaining that this is important, that everything is possible, and that the result might be surprising. However, they all stress that the real academic value is determined with the pre-defence reviews.

The observation reveals that in reality the defence is a formality, a mandatory step in the process of becoming a Doctor of Research, but the atmosphere is not heavily ceremonial. There were opening and closing phrases, and applause from the audience, but it was a very easy-going event.

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Notes

- 1 https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/atto/serie_generale/caricaDettaglioAtto/originario;jsessionid=Nc+kgip1q29nTj241f+mJw__.ntc-as2-guri2b?atto.data PubblicazioneGazzetta=1980-07-31&atto.codiceRedazionale=080U0382&elenco30giorni=false
- 2 <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/gu/1982/09/20/259/sg/pdf>
- 3 European Commission (2010). Organisation of the education system in Italy 2009/2010.
- 4 The term used in Italian for defence is 'esame finale' – final examination.
- 5 <https://web.units.it/normativa/regolamenti/regolamento-44552>
- 6 <https://web.units.it/normativa/regolamenti/regolamento-44552>
- 7 <https://eurymdice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/italy/third-cycle-phd-programmes>
- 8 Art. 11 of the <https://web.units.it/normativa/regolamenti/regolamento-44552>
- 9 Art. 11 of the <https://web.units.it/normativa/regolamenti/regolamento-44552>
- 10 Art. 11 of the <https://web.units.it/normativa/regolamenti/regolamento-44552>
- 11 <https://web.units.it/normativa/regolamenti/regolamento-44552>
- 12 Three of the four examiners responded to our invitation to be interviewed. The one who did not participate is part of the PhD programme, while the others are external. The procedures include appointment of a 'substitute' examiner in case someone is unable to attend the defence. One of the examiners interviewed was originally a 'substitute'.
- 13 Article 23 of the <https://web.units.it/normativa/regolamenti/regolamento-44552>