

The Experience of Examining the PhD

An International Comparative Study of Processes and Standards of Doctoral Examination

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Chapter 18

Sofia University St Kliment Ohridski, Bulgaria

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Introduction

Sofia University St Kliment Ohridski is the oldest and biggest university in Bulgaria. It is a public comprehensive research university and holds top position in almost all professional fields in the national ranking system of higher education. It is the only university figuring in international rating systems holding a position between 500 and 600 places. The University has 194 accredited doctoral programmes and trains close to one-fifth of all doctoral students in the country. To a large extent, it sets the benchmark for the quality of education at doctoral level.

There are 50 universities or equivalent institutions in Bulgaria. Seven of them are research universities and 13 are private universities. They also include universities of arts, former polytechnics and other specialist universities for example for social workers or nurses. Public as well as private universities award doctoral degrees in Doctoral Programmes accredited by the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency complying with Criteria for Programme Accreditation of Doctoral Programmes in accordance with European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area¹. Only universities with an evaluation between 8.00 and 10.00 (scale of 1–10) on programme accreditation have the right to train doctoral students.

The regulatory framework

From 2010, doctoral degrees were awarded by juries which included external examiners. In 2018, a Higher Education Act introduced minimal national standards, which cover requirements and criteria regarding the research and thesis, publications, credits awarded, etc. and the composition of the jury examining and awarding the degree. Doctorates are subject to regulation by both the Higher Education Act, which also regulates Bachelor and Master levels, and by the Act for Development of the Academic Staff which deals with the acquisition of the educational and research degree PhD and the research degree Doctor of Science.

PhD degrees are ‘educational and research’, which means that students have to take courses and participate in various types of research activities totalling

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60 credits per year for full-time and 45 credits per year for part-time students. Those admitted as full-time students to a doctoral programme receive a grant for three years. Students may also register as part-time and study for four years. Students are increasingly involved in teaching activities which can be remunerated or unremunerated; such activities are conceived as part of the development process of young researchers. In recent years, there has been a gradual decrease in the number of doctoral students due to the rather low grants and the need to combine studies and work.

Doctoral students are generally permitted to choose the topics of their thesis freely and are also entitled to choose their individual supervisors. However, they are admitted to and their work is monitored closely by the academic department to which the corresponding Doctoral Programme is accredited. This means *inter alia* that all reports on activities during the years of study and permissions to enter examination are approved by the academic faculty councils, and that apart from the supervisors, departments and faculties are closely involved in the doctoral studies. They have authority in some aspects of the planning and conduct of the research (approving or suggesting modifications of the title of the research, approval of annual reports, decisions to open the procedure for final examination, approval of the academic supervisor, financial support for carrying out of research, fieldwork, and surveys).

Currently regulations for another type of doctoral degree are under legislative discussion – the so-called ‘project doctorate’², which it is envisaged will more closely link doctoral studies with research projects and which will allow for a different type of funding including remuneration for their research work apart from the standard doctoral scholarship.

The PhD is not the final qualification within the Bulgarian academic system. Only the *Habilitation*³ gives the opportunity to be appointed senior assistant professor or docent, i.e., the permission to teach at university level. There is, also, a higher doctorate, Doctor of Science, which is usually a step towards or, in some fields, a requirement for appointment to a full professorship.

The oral examination

Each doctoral student must write and defend a thesis which includes a statement of its original contribution to the academic field of study. The public examination or defence is preceded by an ‘internal defence’ in front of the student’s academic department, with specially invited external experts from the field of study. It takes place usually three to four months before the public defence and is a key step in the examination process as a department decision is required before beginning the official procedure for the public defence.

Each thesis is then reviewed by a panel (or ‘jury’) of five examiners of whom three must be from another academic institution, at least one a full professor and the rest hold the *Habilitation*. A panel is appointed by the Rector of the university on the advice of the student’s department. The supervisor is not a member of the panel.

Two longer and detailed reviews and three shorter statements are delivered in written reports to the student's institution. They are made publicly accessible on the university website for at least twenty days before the public 'defence' or oral examination. The panel expresses an opinion on the scientific work of the candidate, on their capacity to locate their results in the scientific context, on their general skills in presenting the research and importantly on the fulfilment of the minimal requirements for awarding the PhD degree⁴. The public defence, which typically lasts an hour and half to two hours, is the final requirement for acceptance of the thesis. After deliberation, the jury awards the PhD degree without any further classification.

The interviewees

The interviews were conducted between January and April 2021 following the agreed interview schedule. Six examiners from the social sciences and humanities faculties of the university were interviewed (see [Table 18.1](#) for their profiles). They all have substantial experience as examiners and supervisors since 2010 and even before that.

The experience of being an examiner

In a relatively small country with just a few universities awarding doctorates, it is often difficult to find enough colleagues to fill a five-person jury. Furthermore, interviewees felt there has been a substantial rise in the numbers of PhD students in recent years not least for economic reasons:

Here, the PhD is very much a deferred form of unemployment. The large number of PhD students that has been maintained recently is not only related to the economic interests of the departments and the members of the juries, but also related to the economic interests of the PhD students themselves, who receive, according to Bulgarian standards, not very high, but still decent enough financial support such as scholarships and additional opportunities that are related to publications, participation in conferences, the Erasmus programme and other things. (SUE4)

This means that senior academics are often invited to examine and find themselves sitting alongside the same group of colleagues:

I'm always with somebody that I've already been with on another jury or 1 or 2, 3 people. Sometimes just as I said, there are not that many people in my field, so in Bulgaria, I mean, so that that is quite possible that we will be, let's say 3 times in a row, we will be the same people.

(SUE1)

Table 18.1 Profiles of the interviewees

	<i>Participant 1</i>	<i>Participant 2</i>	<i>Participant 3</i>	<i>Participant 4</i>	<i>Participant 5</i>	<i>Participant 6</i>
Gender (M/F)	F	F	F	M	F	M
Nationality	Bulgarian	Bulgarian	Bulgarian	Bulgarian	Bulgarian	Bulgarian
Age	58	65	59	64	61	59
Approximate number of students supervised to completion	5	11		18		
Approximate number of PhD theses examined at Sofia University	8	More than 40	12	42	30	21
Approximate number of PhD theses examined in other universities than your own	7	25	16	9	10	12
Approximate number of PhD theses examined in other countries than your own	0	3	0	3	0	0
Discipline(s) supervised/ examined	Philology	Political Science; European Studies; Public Administration	Bulgarian language (applied linguistics); Methodology of language teaching; Methodology of teaching school subjects	Philosophy; History of Philosophy; European Studies	Public Administration	Cultural Studies
Languages used in examining PhD students	English, Bulgarian	Bulgarian, English	English, Bulgarian	Bulgarian, German, English, Russian	Bulgarian, English	Bulgarian, English
Language(s) used in professional work (current and past)	English, Bulgarian	Bulgarian, English	Bulgarian, English	Bulgarian; German; English; Serbo-Croatian; Russian	Bulgarian, English	Bulgarian, English

One advantage of this is that shared expectations are discussed and applied in all the universities, but being an examiner can be a burden and whenever a thesis might be problematic, it may be better to refuse an invitation:

When I'm approached, if I don't know anything about the person, the, the thesis. So it's well, and your instinct also tells you after all these years, that sometimes it's, it's better to say, no, from the very beginning and not to go into. something that you regret afterwards being there

(SUE1)

Another participant seems to have had difficult experiences and, on the whole, does not enjoy examining, recalling 'several cases where the thesis was not brilliant, its writing, and the defence was, it's a torture, it's a torture for the PhD student and it's a torture for the jury' (SUE2).

Expectations and standards

In some universities, there are explicit criteria which examiners have to use and which are made public on websites, but not at Sofia University. SUE3 sees advantages, even though Sofia University has not introduced this approach: it brings 'the member of the jury closer together, because when there are guided by a common model for a review of for an opinion, they have the same criteria in mind anyway by which to judge the thesis'. In contrast, SUE5, prefers not to have specific criteria 'because after all that is the most valuable thing, we look at the same scientific work in different ways, from different angles'. However, when asked about their own approach, SUE5 enumerates the general characteristics which are shared, 'we have them in our heads', whilst nonetheless saying that the substantive evaluation has to be 'specific' to each thesis.

SUE5's listing of general characteristics is a very similar to what other participants said. She referred to 'research skills and thesis defence skills', to argument supported by evidence (whether theoretical or empirical), to knowledge of the literature and a bibliography which is 'basically representative of the topic' and a structure that 'fits the task of the research' as minimal qualities. These are not however enough:

what makes a thesis a 'non-thesis', i.e. unsuitable for admission to defence, is the lack of a main thesis. Not a hypothesis, as is claimed, as is very often written, the hypothesis is another story, but a basic thesis, i.e. a basic claim. In order to have such a basic claim, of course, in order to have a basic claim, one must first have a clearly formulated research question. If those two things aren't there, it's some text that's, so, just thrown together. So that's the most important requirement.

There is also a general expectation, but not an obligation, that PhD students publish and may submit a thesis which is based on publications:

generally most theses are preceded by publications on the subject, and if not the whole thing, at least chapters of it are published as a form of some research before the defence itself. (...) I wouldn't say it is a requirement, but at least part of the thesis and some of the main theses should be published beforehand, that is, it shouldn't be completely, so, a surprise for those who assume that they will have an interest in the topic.

(SUE4)

These shared expectations may be fulfilled in a satisfactory way, but the better thesis goes beyond the minimum:

there are people who are exceptionally suitable for doing this kind of work to put it in that way. Somehow. They, their thinking is logical. They, they have this consistency, coherence of the text that they've produced. They are very convincing, Even if you think differently, somehow, you, you are convinced at the end that this is the way to analyze understand whatever it will be, the subject that they are dealing with. So, and somehow they even make you start thinking about things that you do in a slightly different way, because of what they've done. I mean, they somehow opened some kind of window even now for you. So that would be exceptional.

(SUE4)

The contrast of the exceptional with the ordinary is striking. The latter have 'done what they're supposed to do, but it's not at all inspiring' and ultimately for SUE1, the crucial element is 'independent thinking', and an ability to formulate one's own conclusions and ideas.

The question of originality is perhaps seen differently in different disciplines. SUE5 singles out philosophy as a discipline where it is obligatory not only to discuss previous work in the world in general, but to consider 'what has been done in this country, and if it has not been done, to explain why'. This contrasts with the natural sciences, and an 'obsession' with an impact factors, and is to be found in the humanities in general.

Whether criteria are explicit or remain 'in our heads', the question of standards raises other considerations. To introduce this issue, we asked the interviewees whether there are differences between masters and doctorate theses. All referred to length and in some cases to 'depth', usually as the first point to mention, length being evident in the bibliography too. Originality and independence are expected in a doctorate thesis but not necessarily in master's theses where students 'stay with things we've already covered, things that they studied' (SUE1). One participant (SUE3) suggested that there is 'a trend of lowering of the requirements for theses' but this comes rather from the students being in a hurry to defend their theses. The standards as such are not lowered but the scope of the thesis, the length of time spent for example on a pedagogical experiment, is reduced. The pressure from universities to complete the thesis is another factor.

Another perspective comes from comparisons across universities in Bulgaria and beyond:

Sofia University is kind of in the middle in that respect. You know, the level is quite higher than other universities in Bulgaria, not always, but in most cases it's quite higher and, I wouldn't say quite lower, but, often quite lower than other countries, including those that are not European Union, for many reasons, mostly because of the status of the PhD itself. Here, the PhD is very much a deferred form of unemployment.

(SUE4)

Others thought however that there is not much difference from 'Western universities'. Differences are a matter of how defences are conducted and whether there are explicit criteria for examiners to follow, rather than standards. More importantly than a foreign/home distinction, according to SUE4, is a distinction within a country, or among specific countries.

Views on whether the thesis should be graded varied. It is significant that one participant (SUE3) said that she had not thought about it before and, on the spur of the moment, was not in favour. It is simply a matter of whether the PhD is awarded or not. Another participant (SUE1) was by contrast in favour, perhaps because of the way she described the exceptional thesis, cited above. She thought it would be better for the students to be able to say they have passed with distinction and not simply 'defended' their thesis, since, once a thesis is accepted for defence, it is very rare for it to be rejected, and SUE4 described the defence as 'ritualistic'.

The oral examination

The final defence

As explained above the final oral examination is an obligatory part of the procedures of acquiring a PhD degree, but preceded by an 'internal defence'. Our participants questioned whether the final defence is a real examination and considered it rather a formality. As SUE1 put it, it is 'partly ceremonial, partly a real examination'. This is due to several factors, including the 'internal defence' which all our participants see as the arena of the real debate on the student's work, and the fact that the reviews and opinion statements of the panel/jury are made public a month before (see above). On the whole, then, the final defence is not seen as an examination. The Bulgarian term is защита, 'defence', and one interviewee concludes that this term better represents the nature of the event because 'it is more about the defence of the theses formulated by the doctoral student in his or her research and in this sense, this so-called "exam", if we can use this term, takes the form of a debate' (SUE5). There may be elements of 'questioning' due to potential deficiencies or omissions in the thesis spotted by the reviewers and included in the reviews which the student is expected to

address during this final oral examination (SUE3). On the other hand, SUE1 emphasises that in its current form the defence does not allow for asking a lot of questions.

The final defence is public but as SUE4 notes since passing the Act on Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, in 2010, the public nature of the event has changed and ‘the doctoral student can invite (people) for the defence ... usually invites relatives or acquaintances, but they do not exceed 10 to 12 people. In this sense, publicity is largely limited ...’. Nonetheless, SUE3 thinks that the final defence is a very important factor in awarding the degree:

I think that defence is a very important element of, of getting a doctorate, because there really is a person who has a scientific position, it is very important that he defends his position or accepts the decision or rejects it, this is part of the scientific activity.

The internal defence as a stepping stone

The internal defence is a crucial stage in the process. Our participants do not refer to cases where a PhD has been stopped from continuing towards the final defence but critical remarks and the opinions expressed may act as a deterrent and, although rare, it is possible that a student will not continue after the internal defence. Three of our examiners refer to such ‘rare’ cases. In general, they all make a connection between the text submitted for review and the qualities of the doctoral student saying they expect to find proof of certain qualities which fall into two main categories. First, there are personal qualities, i.e., ‘psychological maturity’ (SUE2), ‘ability to formulate and defend a thesis’ (SUE5), ‘a lively, alert mind that has managed to cope with the task it has set itself’, ‘self-confidence to work, to do independent work with scientific literature’ (SUE6), ‘stand your ground or accept the (critical) note or reject it’ (SUE3), ‘courage to face these people there (the jury)’ (SUE1). Second, there are research qualities, e.g., ‘knows the literature in the field of, of the object and subject of his research’ (SUE5), ‘an entirely different approach to sources’ (SUE2), ‘it is necessary to give not only what has been done in the world, but also what has been done in our country and if it has not been done, to explain why’ (SUE4).

Sometimes, a student’s work can be so different from what is expected that it may be rejected. SUE4 speaks about a case of a ‘surprisingly modern work’ which the department did not accept. For pragmatic reasons, the student revised it to meet the department’s expectations, but it may also happen that a student decides not to continue. The same examiner mentions three cases where PhDs did not continue after receiving negative feedback or suggestions for improvement, attributing the decision of the student partly to the mindset the student brings to the situation, partly to their misunderstanding of what their own contribution might consist of, which is ‘typical’ of the field of philosophy.

'Consensus'

In the written reviews, jury members clearly state if they accept or reject a thesis. At the final defence PhDs are not given grades, but the jury members vote for or against awarding the degree on the basis of both the submitted thesis and the oral presentation during the defence. In theory, it is possible for a jury member to submit a positive review and then to vote against it at the defence itself but this situation is not very likely. Our participants speak about the jury reaching a 'consensus' – the word they use – and say it is not difficult to reach mainly because the thesis has already been discussed in depth during the 'internal defence' and the final submitted version usually takes into consideration the issues raised then, and is improved. One participant explains that this consensus is reached at the stage of the internal defence:

In fact, such consensus is informally sought and is usually achieved. In general, if there are two members of the jury who do not agree, from a 5-member jury, although that's enough for the thesis to pass, it's generally not a good reference for the whole thesis or it shows some contradiction, doesn't it, which may not be directly related to the doctoral student's work, which is not a very good situation. In general, this is very rare, which in fact shows that consensus is sought. My experience is that at the internal defence, consensus is always sought. There is a greater number of people involved in the discussion. Usually, one opinion prevails in these internal defences, and in the end, those who defend it seek to convince the rest, and in the end, it is not just the majority that is sought. So, yes, consensus is sought, consent is sought. But it is sought along the lines of this mutual persuasion, whether (the thesis) is good or not'.

(SUE5)

Since the change in the law in 2018, the supervisor cannot be on the jury. However, they play a very important role during the internal defence and even the final defence because they have a say in selecting the jury members. This is the reason why SUE6 contends that the final defence leads to 'an expectedly successful end', although they see this as problematic because it might end with theses 'just on the verge of compromise' getting a pass as well as theses 'that really show an exceptional growth of a given young person'.

Language and culture matters

Since the 2018 changes, there have been not simply examples of multiple languages in the process of writing and defending PhD theses, but some new procedures have also been introduced. The need for making internationalisation processes visible at the institutional and even national level has led to the regulation that if a thesis is written in Bulgarian, its author has to submit an abstract both in Bulgarian and in English. All reviews by members of the jury have to be

submitted in both Bulgarian and English. The views and experiences our participants share in this respect are connected with their idea of the changing role and visibility of academic work, the place of the Bulgarian language in the process and of language/languages and research cultures in general.

Using standard language

Our participants do realise that PhD education cannot be a matter only for Sofia University:

Nowadays, this possibility (using multiple languages in writing and defending a PhD thesis) must be absolutely open, especially since we are already in partnership with many European universities. Sometimes our partners are leading. It is natural to be in a language other than Bulgarian.

(SUE6)

All of the interviewees have had experience in supervising a thesis, taking part in an internal defence, or being on a final defence jury for theses in languages other than Bulgarian. They mention English, German, French, and Russian, and one of them speaks about students writing in the language of the literature they are researching, e.g., Portuguese.

Despite some uncertainty about what regulations on the use of languages in a thesis exist ('I'm struggling to remember when this could happen, because I think ... mmm ... I don't really know. Let's say that when the Greeks defend in Bulgaria, they should defend in Bulgarian, right? Or in English?' – SUE3) our interviewees are convinced that 'this can no longer be as strictly regulated in today's connected world as our legislation is still trying to do. There must be changes in this area' (SUE6).

They all have very strong ideas about what they term the 'quality' or 'standard' of the language of a thesis. SUE6 says that language is a researcher's 'weapon', so regardless of the language a student uses, the thesis has to be written in excellent style, observing the rules of standard language. This interviewee also stresses that in social sciences, unlike natural sciences, the terminology is much more fluid, and 'this is a problem when concepts that have different nuances in different languages need to be standardised' making the task of a PhD who writes in a foreign language very complex.

Researchers' responsibility to 'develop the language'

SUE3 discusses the need for Bulgarian language specialists, i.e., teachers of Bulgarian, be they from Bulgaria or from Bulgarian communities abroad, to use standard Bulgarian skilfully ('if the text is scientific, it cannot be "illiterate", right?') and SUE1 explains that in their context when a PhD thesis exploring either some specific linguistic features or literatures is written in another language, '(our colleagues) would never make such allowances. They would insist

that the English of the thesis is perfect. Perfect not just good. Just perfect'. They relate this to the expectation that students should demonstrate a high proficiency level in the respective language, while SUE6 goes further and speaks about researchers' responsibility for developing a language:

Regardless of the language in which the work was created, including Bulgarian, my expectations are for high proficiency and good style. It is inadmissible for a scientific result, especially in the field of social sciences and humanities, to be written in a bad language, because one of the meanings of creating these texts is the development of the language in which you create your text. So, I can't accept a work that is written in a crippled language - English, French, Bulgarian, German or any other.

(SUE6)

Two of our participants refer to the so-called language minimum – the compulsory examination in a foreign language all students take during their first year – pointing out it needs revising as currently it is not enough to really prove a student's actual proficiency in a foreign language. SUE4 even says that it is an obligation for a doctoral student to be really proficient in two languages other than their mother tongue and suggests acknowledging certificates one has acquired outside or before going to university.

While SUE3 expresses remorse for passing some theses in Bulgarian which were 'full of (linguistic) mistakes', SUE5 mentions experience in making allowances for students who write in a language which is not their mother tongue, e.g., arranging for an interpreter to be present during the defence, ignoring linguistic mistakes, etc. The latter is explained with the need to create a favourable environment for doctoral education which is not in Bulgarian:

This is some kind of initial attempt to conduct doctoral training in a language other than one's own, and in that sense, I even think it's permissible to help them in some way to get things started. It will be settled at some point. I guess if someone defends at Humboldt University, they won't ask him if he knows German or he doesn't know German, and if he can't explain, they won't deal with him, but we do because we want to encourage these practices. When we already have a lot of candidates, a lot of PhD students, we will probably take this into account.

(SUE5)

Supervisors' and examiners' language proficiency

Our participants also speak about the linguistic proficiency of supervisors and examiners as a factor in conducting doctoral education in other languages. SUE6 mentions a colleague's words that despite having confidence in using a certain language, when starting to write in this language he 'feels stupid' because his native proficiency is much greater. SUE4 thinks that the range of

communicative situations a supervisor or examiner takes part in is very broad and this necessitates a broader linguistic competence ('... a really wide range of communication, and not only in his field'.) This also depends on the specifics of the discipline. SUE1 points out that in some specific cases of PhD theses written in Eastern languages such as Chinese, it is next to impossible to find jury members proficient in these languages and this means that the PhDs have to submit an 'extended' abstract in Bulgarian to make it possible to constitute the jury. SUE3 thinks that in cases when the thesis is written in a relatively popular language such as English or German, jury members can assess the qualities of the thesis because of their knowledge in the subject matter ('Even if a specialist in Bulgarian language and literature does not speak German, when a thesis is written in ... still in the field of language learning, foreign language learning, he can express a competent opinion'.)

Influence from other research cultures or 'ozonizing the environment'

Our interviewees speak about the need to open to partner universities outside the country and to become more active in implementing PhD education in languages other than Bulgarian, but one of them especially vividly referred to this as an important need:

I have had such, and have such doctoral students, for example Germans, Czechs, Englishmen, Scotsmen, who work here, write a thesis in philosophy or social sciences.

(SUE4)

Coming from different educational and research cultures, such students sometimes face difficulties understanding the local requirements but their presence contributes to enriching the research environment here, they help to 'ozonise' it. Referring to a particular doctoral programme which attracts students from South Africa, the United States, Germany, the Czech Republic, Russia, Serbia, and Bulgarian, SUE4 notes that they all share some common traits due to a global 'Facebook culture', each one brings their own culture and helps in this blending and mutual enrichment of different backgrounds and traditions:

and that's why such people, once again, right, if you liked the expression, ozonize the environment in some way.

Relationships between supervision and examining

According to the 2018 regulations, the supervisor is not a member of the final examination jury and this is a substantial change. All our participants speak about this and think the change has to do with ensuring the assessment is objective but actually question its need. SUE1 says that supervisors cannot be suspected of wanting to influence the process 'because the supervisor does *not* write the thesis.

He has never done it, nor does he do it now'. SUE5 is however of the opinion that the final examination is in a way an examination of the supervisor him or herself.

SUE1 takes a different line, saying that 'We put our souls into the work our students do' and passionately explains why being on the jury is important for a supervisor:

just because there's so much work that we've done together and sometimes all these people who have just read the thesis just once, and they sometimes have never even met the person ever. They don't know what kind of student this person was.

This idea that a supervisor knows their PhD students and their work the best is shared by all interviewees. According to SUE6, the supervisor has a good idea of their student's qualities and this makes them confident that there will be a 'successful ending' and states that 'the process of assessment lies in "this delicate game between the freedom of the young scientist and the moment when he must be supported"'. He believes that in the humanities, in contrast with natural sciences, 'doctoral students have much more freedom and much more autonomy in terms of their dependence on the supervisor, which is good in my opinion'. This is necessary in order to develop as a researcher,

as a person who will have the confidence and courage to continue on his own path, to build his style, his handwriting, his approach, methodological apparatus to choose, theses he has to refute, paradigms he sometimes has to overcome.

SUE3 also mentions looking for proof of the PhD student having become 'a colleague', a peer in the respective research area.

Despite the new requirement which in theory prevents the supervisor from taking part in the final defence actively, our participants believe that a supervisor's role continues to be substantial in practice. Although the supervisor, to put in SUE5's metaphor, is somewhere backstage – 'hidden behind the curtain' – it is the supervisor's responsibility to help the student along the way and make sure the thesis is of the necessary quality. The supervisor is actively involved in the internal defence at which he or she is expected to present the student, usually in a positive light, in front of the department and the invited external experts and also to create the conditions for a constructive discussion of the student's work (SUE4). In SUE6's words, the supervisor no longer being in the final defence jury is 'not a problem. If, in fact, the department has properly evaluated, as well as the supervisor, the work of the doctoral student'.

Both SUE6 and SUE4 stress the relation between the supervisor and examiners – 'it still depends on him in the internal defence of the department who will be the jury'. SUE4 goes on to explain this with respect to the existing level of expertise in the specific research area: 'In each subject, the best specialist is usually the doctoral student himself and, to some extent, his supervisor'.

Conclusion

The change in the law in 2018 has created substantial differences in procedures for the PhD. They include, for our purposes here, a change in the position of the supervisor as examiner. Since supervisors are no longer members of the final examination panel or jury, their influence on the outcome of the whole process of study may diminish. Our interviewees were very aware of these changes and, on the one hand, acknowledged the need but, on the other hand, for some the idea of not being able to see through the whole process right to the end with students whom they had worked with over a number of years was frustrating.

Interviewees also described the examining process as, in a sense, having two elements, the first being the ‘internal defence’ and the second the public defence, often with candidates’ family members present, as well as fellow academics. The final event seems for some interviewees to be more a matter of ritual and celebration than an examination and questioning process, whereas others had experience of more rigorous events. For all however, the internal defence is crucial and ensures that the final ‘defence’ is highly unlikely to lead to anything but success, and a consensus is easily reached that the thesis is passed. There are no grades or marks given and this does not seem to be a matter for discussion although one interviewee thought it would be good to be able to use a mark or grade to distinguish the best from the average.

We are left with the final impression that, in any given discipline, there is a limited number of examiners available, that they know each other well and have a shared concept of the criteria and standards which should be expected. Because of the small number, people are called upon to examine quite frequently, and this has mixed effects. Examining can be a chore, it can also be a ‘torture’ (SUE2) when problems arise, but it can also be a pleasure.

Notes

- 1 <http://www.ehea.info/cid105593/esg.html>
- 2 <https://www.strategy.bg/FileHandler.ashx?fileId=26163>
- 3 The Habilitation does not lead to the award of another academic degree, although it is similar as research outcome, but is a professional qualification for university docents and professors.
- 4 Minimal requirements vary for different professional fields but generally include dissertations and publications, participation in conferences, etc.