

# **Guidelines for the Assessment of Candidates for Norwegian Doctoral Degrees**

Recommended by the Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions  
23 March 2007. Passed by the Board of NTNU on 13 June 2012, with adjustments.

## **1. Regulations and supplementary provisions**

The assessment of academic theses submitted towards doctoral degrees at Norwegian universities and university colleges is regulated by:

- the regulations of the respective institutions for the degree of philosophiae doctor (PhD) and supplementary provisions to these regulations;
- the regulations of the respective institutions for the degree of Dr. philos.

The regulations and supplementary provisions for the degree in question must be made known to all those involved in the assessment of candidates for doctoral degrees at each institution. The following guidelines are derived from and formulated within the framework of these regulations, with particular focus on the process of assessment. The aim of these guidelines is to provide a supplementary discussion of the norms and procedures which are assumed to be common to all Norwegian doctoral degrees. Consequently, these guidelines are general and are intended to complement the specifications in the regulations and the supplementary provisions for the degrees at the respective institutions.

## **2. Preparatory procedures**

### *2.1 Appointment of an assessment committee*

The Faculty appoints an assessment committee consisting of no less than three members, on the recommendation of the academic staff in the discipline concerned. The recommendation should list the relevant qualifications of the individual members and how the committee as a whole covers the subject matter of the thesis. Normally, the genders should be represented on the committee, at least two of the members should have no connection to the institution and at least one of the members should have his or her main position at a foreign institution. If this is not possible, the reason for this must be stated

The doctoral candidate must be informed of the composition of the committee. The candidate may comment on the composition of the committee, informing the Faculty of any problems with partiality or other matters of significance.

To ensure the required progress in the assessment procedure, the Faculty appoints an administrator for the assessment committee. The administrator should preferably be a member of the institution. The Faculty may appoint one of the members of the committee as administrator, or the Faculty may instead appoint an administrator from its academic staff who does not participate in the assessment of the thesis. The member of the under-represented gender on the committee is not normally to be the administrator of the committee.

The administrator of the committee is responsible for the organization of the committee's work, including ensuring the required progress from the start and observing the deadline set for the completion of the committee's work. The administrator is responsible for coordinating the compilation of the committee's report on the thesis and for distributing tasks among the committee members in connection with the disputation.

For PhD, the thesis must be submitted to the committee along with an account of where the training was carried out and the name of the candidate's supervisor(s). Documentation must be provided of the approved research training programme in which the candidate has participated. As the training programme has already been approved, the purpose of submitting this information to the committee is not to obtain any approval from the committee, but rather to assist the committee's formulation of the topic for the trial lecture.

In cases where a revised version of a thesis is submitted for re-assessment, the new assessment committee must contain at least one member of the original committee.

If a candidate who has previously submitted a thesis which was subsequently rejected submits an entirely new thesis for assessment, a new assessment committee may be appointed.

### *2.2 Correction of errors of a formal nature after submission of the doctoral thesis*

A thesis that has been submitted may not be withdrawn. However, the doctoral candidate is entitled to make minor corrections of a formal nature. These must be submitted in the form of an errata sheet enclosed with the copies of the thesis submitted to the Faculty no later than four (4) weeks before the deadline for submission of the committee's final report. No other corrections may be made to a work which has been submitted for assessment. See, however, Section 3.5 on the committee's opportunity to recommend minor revisions of the thesis.

## **3. The committee's assessment report**

On appointing the assessment committee, the Faculty stipulates a time frame for the period from the submission of the thesis to the deadline for the committee's assessment report. The date for the presentation of the committee's assessment report should not be later than three (3) months from the submission of the thesis to the members of the committee.

### *3.1 Description of the thesis*

The committee's report must contain a short description of the format of the thesis (monograph/ collection of papers), the type of work involved (i.e. theoretical/empirical) and the length of the thesis. The report must also include a discussion of the academic significance of the thesis and central factors concerning its theoretical framework, hypotheses, material, methodology and findings.

### *3.2 Assessment of the thesis*

A Norwegian doctoral degree is awarded as proof that the candidate's research qualifications are of a certain standard. Degrees *with* a specified schedule and an organized research training programme (PhD) and degrees *without* such requirements (Dr. philos.) are regarded as being of an equal standard. This principle of equivalence refers to the academic *standard* and *quality* of the work submitted, not merely its *scope*. In the organized research training programmes, qualifications may be documented through tests and participation in various activities within the training programme. Since the degree of Dr. philos. does not include an organized research training programme, the preparatory work (e.g. the collection of data) and the thesis itself are expected to be more extensive than that required in degrees with an organized research training programme. Irrespective of the kind of degree, the candidate must satisfy the *minimum requirements to qualify as a researcher* – demonstrated through requirements related to the formulation of research questions, precision and logical stringency, originality, a good command of current methods of analysis and be able to reflect on their possibilities and limitations. He/she must also demonstrate knowledge of, understanding of and a reflective attitude towards other research in the field.

When assessing a doctoral thesis, special consideration should be given to whether the thesis is an

independent and comprehensive piece of work of high academic standard with regard to the formulation of research questions. The assessment should also consider the methodological, theoretical and empirical bases, documentation, treatment of the literature and form of presentation in the thesis. It is especially important to consider whether the material and methods applied are relevant to the issues raised in the thesis, and whether the arguments and conclusions posited are tenable. The thesis must contribute new knowledge to the discipline and be of an academic standard appropriate for publication as part of the scientific literature in the field.

If the thesis consists of several interrelated minor pieces of work, the candidate must document the integrated nature of the work and the assessment committee must decide whether the content comprises a coherent entity. In such cases, the candidate must compile a separate part of the thesis that not only summarizes but also compares the research questions and conclusions presented in the separate pieces of work. This summarizing part of the thesis is to provide a comprehensive overview to document the coherence of the thesis. This summarizing part of the thesis is of great importance for the doctoral candidate and for the committee's assessment of the work submitted.

If the thesis includes one or more joint publications, the doctoral candidate must obtain declarations from his/her co-author(s), including their consent to use the work as part of the thesis. The committee must consider to what extent the candidate's contribution to the joint publication can be identified and whether the candidate is solely responsible for a sufficient part of the thesis. The summarizing part of the thesis must be written solely by the candidate. If the documentation submitted by the candidate is insufficient, the committee may take steps to obtain further information.

In special cases, the committee may require the submission of source material and supplementary or clarifying information.

If the thesis is submitted as a joint publication, it is reasonable to expect the scope of the research project and/or thesis to be more extensive than that of the work of an individual. Each of the doctoral candidates must, as far as possible, be assessed and tested in accordance with the requirements for the assessment of work submitted by one person. A thesis for the degree of philosophiae doctor (PhD) cannot be submitted by two or more joint candidates.<sup>1</sup>

### *3.3 The conclusion*

The conclusion of the committee's report should comprise an assessment and a discussion of the strong and weak points of the thesis. This assessment leads to a conclusion as to whether the committee finds the thesis worthy for public defence, or whether the committee recommends that the thesis is to be rejected. If there is dissent among the members of the committee, the reasons for dissent must be stated.

### *3.4 The committee's report*

The committee's report is to be submitted to the Faculty. It is preferred that the committee issues a joint report, with any individual statements enclosed. Grounds for dissent among the members of the committee must always be stated. Individual statements may be enclosed with the report even if the committee's conclusion is unanimous.

In cases in which the committee concludes that the thesis should be approved for public defence, the committee should formulate a relatively brief recommendation. If the committee's recommendation is to reject the thesis, it is reasonable to include more details stating the reasons for the decision.

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<sup>1</sup> Regulations for the Philosophiae Doctor degree (PhD) at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), passed by the Board of NTNU on 23 January 2012, Section 10.1.

### 3.5 Revision of a submitted thesis<sup>2</sup>

On the basis of the submitted thesis and any additional material the assessment committee may recommend that the Faculty permits the candidate to make minor revisions to the thesis before the committee submits its final report. This can only relate to changes of a non-substantial character for the thesis, but which may raise it to a higher level. This is not a normal procedure and the committee should only give such recommendation if it considers it probable that a revision with a satisfactory standard can be achieved within approximately three (3) months.

In such instances the committee is to provide a written list of the specific items that the candidate must revise. The committee should give some indication as to which parts of the thesis are in need of improvement (for example methodology, relationship between material and conclusion, use of concepts, clarity of questions raised, etc.). This type of indication should not give the impression that a new assessment will necessarily lead to approval of the thesis.

If the committee concludes that fundamental changes to theory, hypotheses, material and/or methodology are necessary before a thesis can be recommended for public defence, the committee should reject the same thesis.

If the Faculty allows minor revisions to the thesis, a deadline normally not exceeding three (3) months is to be set for completing such revisions. A new deadline for submission of the committee's final report must also be set.

The opportunity to make minor revisions should *not* be considered a new assessment, but implies that the assessment is postponed. Consequently, this procedure does not affect the opportunity to resubmit a doctoral thesis should the thesis then be rejected.

## 4. Treatment of the committee's report on the thesis

The committee's written report and conclusion as to whether the thesis is to be recommended for public defence is then submitted to the Faculty for forwarding to the doctoral candidate as soon as possible. Any comments from the doctoral candidate must be submitted in writing within ten (10) working days to the Faculty, which will then forward these to the committee members. Any reply from the committee must be sent to the Faculty. The decision lies with the Faculty as to whether the thesis is to be approved for public defence and the candidate may appear for the doctoral degree examination, or whether the thesis is to be rejected, including whether a recommendation should be given for the thesis to be resubmitted in a revised version. A new assessment can take place no sooner than six (6) months after the Faculty has made its decision.

## 5. The committee's assessment of the trial lecture(s) and public defence

### 5.1 Trial lecture(s)

The objective of the trial lecture(s) is to document the doctoral candidate's ability to impart to others the knowledge gained through his/her research. The trial lecture(s) should be structured so as to be accessible to an audience with knowledge of the subject that can be expected among advanced students (with at least one year of study in the academic field).

For degrees/programmes for which a lecture on an elected topic is required (Dr. philos.), the doctoral candidate must forward the title of the chosen topic to the Faculty no later than four (4) weeks before the disputation.

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<sup>2</sup> See Regulations for the Philosophiae Doctor degree (PhD) at NTNU, Section 15.2 and Additional comments to the Recommended Guidelines for the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) Degree issued by the Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions, adopted by the Board of the Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions on 29 April 2011

The theme of the prescribed topic should not be selected from the central research questions covered by the doctoral candidate's degree work. The candidate must be informed of the prescribed topic at least ten (10) working days before the public defence. A trial lecture on a chosen topic must *not* be a summary of the thesis and findings therein, but must represent an independent academic contribution to the field.

The assessment committee decides whether the trial lecture(s) is/are to be approved or not. In the assessment of the trial lecture(s), emphasis should be placed on both the academic content and the candidate's ability to impart knowledge. The trial lecture(s) is/are part of the doctoral degree examination and must be approved prior to the public defence. For degrees requiring two trial lectures, these are to be assessed jointly. If the trial lectures are rejected the committee must state its grounds for this. If the trial lecture(s) is/are not approved, a second attempt at the trial lecture(s) and public defence may be made in accordance with the regulations for that particular degree.

### *5.2 Public defence*

The public defence is headed by the Dean or a person authorized by the Dean. The opponents are appointed by the Faculty or the assessment committee. Care must be taken to select opponents who will ensure that critical views of the thesis are not repressed. The public defence is opened by the first opponent and concluded by the second opponent.

Other persons present wishing to take part in the discussion *ex auditorio* must notify the chairperson of the public defence about this within the time limit determined by the chairperson and announced at the start of the proceedings. Further details about how the public defence is organized may be found in the regulations and supplementary provisions for doctoral degrees. Any traditions and customary practice in public defence for a particular degree should be taken into account.

The public defence is an academic discussion between the opponents and the doctoral candidate concerning the research questions raised, the methodological, empirical and theoretical sources, documentation and form of presentation. A primary objective is to test the validity of the central conclusions drawn by the candidate in his/her work. The questions that the opponents choose to address need not be limited to those mentioned in the committee's report. The opponents should seek to give the discussion a form which allows those unfamiliar with the content of the thesis or the subject area to follow the discussion.

The chairperson of the public defence is responsible for ensuring that the time available is used effectively and that the discussion is concluded within the given time limit. At the end of the proceedings the chairperson of the public defence will declare the public defence closed. The chairperson does not give an assessment of the public defence, but merely refers to the assessment that will be given in the committee's report.

### *5.3 Assessment of the public defence*

If a thesis is found to be worthy of public defence, this will normally lead to approval of the thesis and its defence for the doctoral degree. Should the main conclusions of the thesis prove to be untenable through factors which come to light during the course of the public defence, the committee must evaluate the public defence as unsatisfactory. This is also the case if critical factors come to light during the public defence which may be crucial in the assessment of the work, such as a breach of ethical research norms or sound academic practice.

### *5.4 The committee's report*

After the disputation, the assessment committee is to submit a report about whether the trial

lecture(s) and the public defence have been deemed worthy of recommendation.

It is the responsibility of the committee to decide whether or not to recommend the approval of the disputation. Should new factors come to light during the course of the disputation which create uncertainty among the committee members and which cannot be resolved during the disputation, the committee should assess the possible consequences of these factors before making a final assessment in the report.

## **6. Concluding procedures**

The committee's report on the result of the trial lecture(s) and the public defence is submitted to the Faculty for further consideration. In principle, the Faculty is at liberty to draw its own conclusions. However, it is extremely rare for the Faculty to reject a unanimous recommendation from the assessment committee except for extraordinary reasons. Such reasons could be, for instance, obvious misinterpretation by the assessment committee of the institution's quality requirements, or new information which comes to light after the committee's report has been finalized (e.g. academic misconduct) and which may have a bearing on the final decision.

If the Faculty approves the disputation, the Faculty will award the doctoral degree to the candidate.

## **7. Appeal**

Provisions relating to the right to appeal the rejection of a thesis, public defence or trial lecture(s) are stipulated in the institution's regulations for each type of degree.