

Guidelines concerning the public defence of doctoral theses

Social Sciences Directorate of Doctoral Studies (Directorate of Studies 40)

(Last updated on 31 July 2025)

The purpose of a public defence is to defend the doctoral thesis, including the theoretical approach, research design, data collection and results before an examination committee. The candidate is expected to address the criticism and suggestions raised by the reviewers in their reviews.

- The examination committee for a public defence typically consists of the **two reviewers and a chairperson**. Supervisors may attend the defence.
- All members of the examination committee participate in the grading.
- If reviewers are unable to attend in person, the public defence may be conducted in a **hybrid format or entirely online**. Reviewers are requested to inform the StudiesServiceCentre (SSC) and the candidate as soon as possible if they can only participate via video conference.
- If the examination committee is unable to meet as planned due to unforeseeable circumstances (e.g. sudden illness of a reviewer), the Directorate of Doctoral Studies (DSPL) and the SSC must be informed immediately. In this case, the defence may be carried out with a substitute member, provided the candidate explicitly agrees to this change. If no substitute member can be found or if the candidate declines the change, the defence must be postponed.

Procedure

- A public defence typically lasts about 90 minutes.
- It starts with a welcome by the chairperson including an explanation of the procedure.
- Afterwards, the candidate gives a **20-minute presentation**, in which they introduce the doctoral thesis project, elaborate the research design and present the results. It is important for candidates to specifically address the comments in the reviews and defend their doctoral thesis in an academic manner.
- This is followed by a **60-minute question-and-answer session led by the examination committee**, usually initiated by the chairperson. The reviewers have the opportunity to ask in-depth and follow-up questions to the candidate. If time permits, the chairperson may invite questions from the audience (including the supervisor(s), if present).
- The public defence is followed by an **internal discussion** of the examination committee regarding the grading of the public defence. The chairperson then communicates the result of the defence to the candidate, usually by also providing brief feedback.
- The chairperson completes the form “Minutes of the final oral examination” including the grade for the public defence and submits it to the SSC. If the defence takes place on site, all members of the examination committee must sign the form.

Result

- After the public defence, each committee member assigns a **numerical grade (1–5)** for the entire examination (i.e. the presentation and the question-and-answer session). This grade is independent of the grades for the written doctoral thesis.
- If the examination committee reaches a majority decision, i.e. the majority of the committee assigns the same grade, this majority decision applies (e.g., 1, 1, 3 → majority decision is “Excellent” (Sehr Gut, 1)). If the committee cannot reach a majority decision, the arithmetic mean is calculated (e.g. 1, 3, 5 → arithmetic mean = $(1+3+5)/3$ = “Satisfactory” (Befriedigend, 3)). If the number after the decimal point is less than or equal to 0.5, it is rounded to the better grade. The result of the assessment is a numerical grade.

If you have questions, please do not hesitate to contact us:

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