UPPSALA
UNIVERSITET

Department of Psychology

FOR THE OPPONENT – USEFUL INFORMATION AND HINTS

Background

To qualify for a doctoral position in Psychology at Uppsala University, the applicant must have a master´s degree either including or in addition a minimum of 90 Swedish study credits in psychology. A PhD is supposed to be attainable after four years of full-time studies, or after 5-6 years for those employed as part-time demonstrators during studies. About 25% of the effort goes into research courses etc., the rest is an individual research programme, normally performed under guidance, leading to publishable results. The research programme is crowned with the presentation of a PhD thesis which is defended in public at the dissertation. The procedure is outlined below.

The thesis

Mostly, the thesis is written as a summary of several published papers. This summary and the published papers are equal in importance and should be fully discussed. The thesis could also be written as a monograph and is then, of course, discussed very thoroughly.

The participants

The opponent

This person will probably be yourself.

The respondent

This is your “victim”. You are probably familiar with this person through some scientific publications, and you might have met him/her at a conference or two. You can address him/her with his/her first name.

The chairman

Generally, the chairman is a professor of the department at which the respondent has been working.

The examining committee

The examining committee is appointed by the dean of the faculty board and consists of three or five members. Usually, it consists of the examiner (a professor of the department), another member of the social science faculty at Uppsala University, and a highly recognized scientist from a different university. The members of the examining committee meet after the public discussion of the dissertation to discuss the matter of approval or not. Being the opponent for the faculty, you will be asked to participate in the discussions. You will, however, not have a vote when the final decision has to be made and you should not present any written judgment. At the meeting, the supervisor of the respondent could also participate, but does not have a vote in the final decision and should leave the room when this decision is taken.

The committee meeting might take as long as 30-45 minutes. An important topic, which is usually discussed, is the defence of the thesis. In case another author is included in the original papers, there are then reasons to discuss the independent abilities of the respondent and which parts of the work she or he is fully responsible for., which is typically answered by the supervisor. Recent developments in this particular research field and the possible impact of the works just presented might be discussed. The opponent is also generally asked to make a comment on the standard of the respondent in comparison with a PhD from his or her home country. By the way, the (bad) weather is also a great topic for debate during these gatherings.

The audience

Swedish dissertations are public affairs of some pomp and circumstance. There will be an audience consisting of friends and relatives of the respondent, as well as collaborators and colleagues from the university. The audience is addressed Ladies and Gentlemen and no other ranking is necessary.

The time schedule

The time schedule for the event is approximately the following:

The chairman declares the session opened and presents the opponent and the respondent as well as the latter’s thesis. The chairman then introduces the different members of the examining committee (4-5 min.).

The respondent has the opportunity to make some comments, especially if an errata list has been produced (2-3 min.).

The opponent presents a summary of the thesis (30 min).This presentation typically builds on a power point presentation.

The respondent will have the opportunity to state if he or she agrees with the summary and thinks that the opponent has treated the work fairly (2-3 min.).

The opponent then begins with a more detailed examination of the work leading, hopefully, to a scientific discussion on a high level (60-90 min.). The questioning and criticism is normally restricted only to the contents of the papers presented, including the broader concepts of which they are a part, as well as references quoted. Questions on other parts of the discipline or adjacent subjects not included in the papers are normally not dealt with, but have been examined during the time of the PhD programme.

At the end of the examination the opponent may rise and finish off by saying some phrases of appreciation and congratulation (if appropriate). The respondent may in return thank the opponent for the discussion.

After the opponent has finished the criticism of the work, the thesis is officially opened for debate with the members of the review committee and the audience. Questions can be directed towards both the opponent and the respondent. Most questions are, however, directed towards the respondent and sometimes no questions at all are posed (0-10 min.).

When the discussion is finished the chairman closes the session and the members of the examining committee withdraw for their official meeting.

The purpose of the opposition

As mentioned above, the opponent will first have the obligation to give a short summary (about 30 min.) of the work presented as the thesis. This slightly unusual Swedish custom is based on an old academic tradition: it is necessary for the opponent to demonstrate to the examiners, the audience, (and the respondent) that he or she knows the field, has read the thesis, and is prepared to give the respondent a fair chance. As the audience – in part – consists of laymen, it is appreciated if the presentation of the work, at least at the beginning, is kept at the level of “popular science”. It is appropriate if the value of the dissertation in a wider context can be presented here. This wider context can be purely scientific but can preferably be connected to other types of human activity. It is also the place where you can point to the highlights of the thesis.

The most difficult part comes when you proceed to make your detailed examination of the thesis. This part should, as mentioned above, take about 60-90 min. The expectations for this part vary. The respondent hopes for a friendly talk, the examiner hopes for a high quality scientific discussion and the examining committee longs for some real dubious parts to be exposed. During this part you are responsible for keeping the show going. You are supposed to make all kinds of remarks about the dissertation. You can go into details and make remarks about every misspelling or badly drawn figure. This might, however, not be recognized as very thrilling and constructive. Instead, it is more interesting if a scientific discussion can be started where the relevance of the hypothesis, appropriateness of the methods, significance of the results, and implications of the conclusions are debated. Other areas which might be of interest: Are the references used in the right way? Are important references within the field

missing? Could the problems have been solved in a more adequate way? Are the conclusions justified?

You may bring up any kind of question concerning the field to the respondent. However, the questions should concern principles and how they are used rather than being directed as questions of pure knowledge. The aim is to create an atmosphere of discussion on a high scientific level. The respondent should be forced to try to defend his/her thesis but should always be given a small back-door through which to escape. It is most disturbing if the discussion comes to a dead end. You need to drop the subject before then and then go on to another subject: and, always remember, it is your obligation to keep the discussion going, preferably by stimulating the respondent to talk.

It is the formal examining committee who has the doubtful privilege of deciding about a pass or fail, and that session will occur behind closed doors, without the presence of the respondent, family or friends. (Actually, 99% of all dissertations have a happy ending, and if you find the work very bad, please contact the examiner or the responsible supervisor so the whole event can be cancelled or postponed well in advance.) This does not mean that the event is meaningless. What is tested is the ability to defend the thesis. (That is an old academic tradition and part of the Swedish scientific education.) The role of the opponent is to make the thesis “transparent” to the examining committee and other colleagues so as to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the work. Do not make the poor parts of the work too obvious to friends and relatives.

Technical equipment

There are computers for the opponent to use for the power point presentation at the University and there is also technical staff around to help. However, if you would like to use your own computer, please make sure to bring the necessary electrical equipment (e.g., electrical cord and if you are a MAC-user, the VGA-adapter).

Dress Code

There is no formal dress code, however the examination is a formal occasion and the clothing usually smart causal.