



Western Norway
University of
Applied Sciences

Guidelines
for
the assessment
of
doctoral degrees at
Western Norway
University of Applied
Sciences

Approved by the Central PhD committee

16 November 2022

based on a recommendation from Universities
Norway (UHR) 13 May 2022

0. About the guidelines

The document is based on guidelines recommended by Universities Norway (UHR) on 13.5.2022, and are supplementary to UHR's *General guidelines for scientific and artistic PhD programmes* approved on 9.4 April 2018.

The aim of the guidelines is to help ensure that the assessment of doctoral degrees, i.e. the assessment of doctoral theses, trial lectures and public defences, is carried out according to a common standard.

The assessment of doctoral degrees is regulated by the Regulations for the degree of Philosophiae doctor (PhD) at Western Norway University of Applied sciences. If these assessment guidelines are contradictory to HVL's doctoral regulation, the doctoral regulation take precedence. Everyone who is involved in assessing doctoral work must be made aware of HVL's regulation.

1. About Norwegian doctoral degrees

A Norwegian doctoral degree is awarded as certification of the candidate's competence in research at third-cycle level in accordance with the Norwegian Qualifications Framework for Higher Education.

The level of competence in degrees with time norms and organised research training (the PhD degree) is assumed to be equivalent to that of the dr. philos. degree, which has no time norms or organised research training. The principle of equivalence refers to the academic standard and quality of the doctoral work, not merely its volume. Emphasis must be placed on the quality, relevance and significance of the doctoral work, and not on whether it has been published or made public at the time of assessment or where it may have been published or made public.

In the organised research training, competence can also be documented through practical tests and participation in various activities within the training component. The absence of a requirement for training in the dr. philos. degree is expected to be compensated by more extensive thesis work than what would be required for the organised research training programmes. Irrespective of the type of degree, the candidate must satisfy the same minimum requirements for research competence – demonstrated through the qualification framework's requirements for knowledge, skills and general competence at the third-cycle level.

Organised research training at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences leads to a scientific PhD, 'philosophiae doctor'.

Regulations for the Degree of Philosophiae doctor (PhD) at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences:

Section 1-4. The PhD degree

The PhD degree is awarded on the basis of:

- a. an approved doctoral thesis;
- b. approved completion of the training component;
- c. an approved trial lecture on a assigned topic; and
- d. the approved public defence of the doctoral thesis.

2. Distribution of work between committee members

The members of the assessment committee must assess the PhD thesis, trial lecture, and public defence on an independent basis.

(If the trial lecture and public defence takes place separately, the dean appoints a separate committee that also determines the topic, cf. the PhD regulation Section 5-16, fifth paragraph).

The chair of the assessment committee is the point of contact between the committee and the institution. The committee chair ensures that deadlines are met, that the assessment meets the requirements for academic quality and that the external committee members are familiar with the entire assessment process. The chair is responsible for initiating the work of the assessment committee, for coordinating the committee members' recommendations and for submitting the final recommendation to the institution.

The chair helps to clarify the distribution of work between the committee members.

3. Assessment committee's assessment of the thesis

3.1 Requirements for the thesis

Regulations for the Degree of Philosophiae doctor (PhD) at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences:

Section 4-10. Thesis requirements

- (1) The thesis must be an independent research project that meets international standards for ethical requirements, academic level and methods used in the relevant research field.
- (2) The thesis must contribute to the development of new knowledge and achieve a level meriting publication as a part of the discipline's scientific literature.
- (3) The thesis may consist of a monograph or a compendium of several shorter manuscripts. If the thesis consists of several shorter manuscripts, an explanation of how these are interrelated must be included.
- (4) If an article has been produced in cooperation with other authors, the PhD candidate must follow the norms for co-authorship that are generally accepted within the academic community and are in accordance with international standards. If the thesis mainly consists of articles, the candidate must normally be listed as the first author on at least half of the articles.
- (5) A thesis containing articles written by more than one author must include a declaration that describes the candidate's contribution to each of the articles, signed by the candidate and co-authors,
- (6) The programme committee decides what languages can be used in a thesis (ref. Section 2-2).

3.2 Assessment of the thesis

Regulations for the Degree of Philosophiae doctor (PhD) at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences:

Section 5-6. Gathering of supplementary information

- (1) The assessment committee may require the PhD candidate to submit their research data and any additional or clarifying information.
- (2) The assessment committee may ask the supervisor to provide information of the supervision and thesis work.

Section 5-7. Revision of a submitted thesis

- (1) On the basis of the submitted thesis and any additional material (ref. Section 5-6), the assessment committee may recommend that the programme committee permit the candidate to make minor revisions to the thesis before the committee submits its final report. The committee must provide a written list of the specific areas that the candidate must revise.
- (2) If the programme committee allows minor revisions of the thesis, a deadline must be given for this revision, which normally must be no longer than three (3) months. A new deadline must also be set for the submission of the committee's final report. The institution's decision after this provision cannot be appealed by the PhD candidate.
- (3) If the committee finds that extensive changes regarding the thesis's theory, hypothesis, material or methodology are needed in order for the work to be deemed worthy of a public defence, the committee must reject the thesis.

In the assessment of the thesis, particular emphasis is placed on whether the thesis is an independent and comprehensive scientific work of a high academic standard in terms of research questions, methodology, theoretical and empirical basis, documentation, critical assessment of the literature and form of presentation. It is particularly important that an assessment is made of the suitability of the material and methods in relation to the questions raised in the thesis, and the validity of the arguments and conclusions presented.

The thesis must constitute new knowledge within the field and be of a level that makes it worthy of publishing as part of the scientific literature within the subject area.

If the thesis consists of a collection of several shorter pieces of work (manuscripts/articles), the committee shall, based on the summary of the thesis (cf. Section 4-10, third paragraph), assess whether the content of the individual works collectively form a whole. The summary must be written solely by the candidate, and is a very important part of the thesis both for the candidate and for the committee's assessment. In the summary, the candidate must not only summarise, but also synthesise the research questions and conclusions presented in the individual works in an overarching perspective, and in doing so show how the different works are related.

If the thesis contains several pieces of work from more than one author, the committee shall, based on the declaration of co-authorship, assess whether the candidate's contributions are identifiable and whether the candidate is solely responsible for a sufficiently large part of the thesis. If the candidate's own documentation is not sufficient, the committee can obtain additional information.

If the thesis in its entirety is submitted as a joint work, the research project and/or thesis will naturally be more extensive than would be the case for an individual piece of work. As far as is possible, each of the candidates must be assessed and tested according to the same requirements for individual pieces of work. Monographs cannot be accepted as joint work.

3.3 Assessment committee's recommendation and conclusion

Regulations for the Degree of Philosophiae doctor (PhD) at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences:

Section 5-8. The assessment committee recommendation

- (1) The assessment committee gives its recommendation as to whether the work is worthy of public defence. The recommendation must include a reasoned report and any dissenting views.
- (2) The assessment committee's recommendation must be submitted no later than three (3) months after the committee has received the thesis. If the committee allows revisions of the thesis, a new submission deadline is set.
- (3) The assessment committee's recommendation is submitted to the programme committee, who then presents it to the PhD candidate. The candidate is given a deadline of ten (10) working days to submit written comments to the recommendation. If the candidate does not wish to comment, the programme committee must be notified of this in writing as soon as possible.
- (4) Any comments from the PhD candidate must be submitted to the dean, who makes the final decision on the matter in accordance with Section 5-10.

The recommendation must contain a brief description of the work's format (monograph/collection of articles) and its key elements (e.g. theory, hypotheses, material, methodology and findings). It must also include a description of the thesis' scientific significance and its key elements (e.g. theory, hypotheses, material, methodology and findings).

If the committee approves the doctoral work for public defence, a relatively brief explanation of its reasoning should be given. The committee should then endeavour to set out its recommendation in a general and concise form. In cases where the committee concludes that the doctoral work should not be approved, a more detailed explanation of the committee's reasoning is expected. The candidate may submit comments on the committee's recommendation via HVL.

Revision of a submitted thesis (cf. the PhD regulation Section 5-7)

If the committee recommends that a scientific PhD thesis should not be approved for public defence in its current form, but that a minor revision could bring it up to a satisfactory standard within a deadline which normally must not be longer than three (3) months, it can recommend that the candidate be given the opportunity to undertake such work. When recommending a minor revision, the committee must provide a written overview of what exactly needs to be revised. The committee should indicate which areas need to be strengthened (e.g. the relationship between the data material and the conclusion, use of documentation, use of terms, clarity of research questions). Making the necessary changes does not guarantee automatic approval of the thesis in the committee's final assessment. The assessment of a thesis following a minor revision does not constitute a re-assessment; it is regarded as a postponement of the original assessment. If a thesis is rejected following a minor revision, the candidate can submit the thesis for re-assessment one more time cf. the PhD regulation Section 5-13.

4. Assessment committee's assessment of the doctoral examination

The doctoral examination for the PhD consists of a trial lecture and public defence of the thesis (disputation).

4.1 Trial lecture

Regulations for the Degree of Philosophiae doctor (PhD) at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences:

Section 5-16. Trial lecture

- (1) After the thesis has been submitted for assessment according to Section 5-3, the PhD candidate must hold a trial lecture. The trial lecture is an independent part of the examination for the PhD degree and must be held on an assigned topic.
- (2) The intention is to test the candidate's ability to acquire knowledge beyond the topic of the thesis and to convey this knowledge in a lecture situation.
- (3) The title of the trial lecture is made known to the PhD candidate ten (10) working days before it takes place. The topic of the trial lecture must not be directly connected to the topic of the thesis.
- (4) The trial lecture is held in connection with the public defence, and the assessment committee sets the topic of the trial lecture and performs the evaluation.
- (5) If the trial lecture and public defence takes place separately, the dean appoints a separate committee that also determines the topic. In such cases, at least one of the assessment committee members must participate in the trial lecture assessment.
- (6) The trial lecture must be held in the language of the thesis, unless another language has been approved by the dean.
- (7) The assessment committee for the trial lecture decides whether the lecture is approved or not. Disapproval must be substantiated.
- (8) The trial lecture must be approved before the public defence can be held.
- (9) If the trial lecture is not approved by the assessment committee, a new trial lecture must be held. The new trial lecture must be held on a new topic and no later than six (6) months after the first attempt. A trial lecture may be re-held only once. The new trial lecture is normally assessed by the same committee as for the original.

The candidate must, during the trial lecture, document their ability to acquire and convey research-based knowledge beyond their specialist field.

The trial lecture should be presented in such a way that it can also benefit students at master level. The assessment committee will give the trial lecture a pass or fail grade. In the assessment, emphasis is placed on both academic content and the candidate's ability to convey this.

4.2 Disputation

Regulations for the Degree of Philosophiae doctor (PhD) at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences:

Section 5-17. Public defence of the thesis

- (1) The public defence of the thesis should take place after the trial lecture has been held and approved, and no later than two (2) months after the thesis has been deemed worthy of defence.
- (2) The time and location of the public defence must be announced at least ten (10) working days prior to the scheduled date.
- (3) The original assessment committee will also assess the public defence. The public defence is conducted in the language of the thesis, unless the dean, upon the recommendation of the assessment committee, approves another language.
- (4) There are normally two opponents. The opponents must be external members of the assessment committee and are appointed by the dean.
- (5) The public defence is chaired by the dean or someone appointed by the dean. The chair of the public defence gives a brief account of the submission, the assessment of the thesis, and the trial lecture. Then the PhD candidate presents the intent and results of their scientific investigation. The opposition is opened by the first opponent and closed by the second. Others in attendance may comment *ex auditorio*. The chair of the defence concludes the defence proceedings.
- (6) The dean may establish another division of tasks.
- (7) The assessment committee gives its recommendation to the dean, and presents its assessment of the defence of the thesis.
- (8) The recommendation concludes whether the public defence is approved or not. The grounds for non-approval must be substantiated.

For a more detailed description of the public defence process and the distribution of responsibilities between the participants, reference is made to HVLs guidelines and procedures for public defence, as well as current practice for the given PhD programme.

In the scientific doctoral thesis, the public defence must take the form of an academic discussion between the opponents and the candidate on the research questions, methodologies, empirical and theoretical basis, documentation and form of presentation. Particular emphasis should be placed on verifying the validity of the core conclusions drawn by the candidate in their work. The research questions that the opponents choose to address do not need to be limited to those covered in the committee's recommendation.

The opponents should encourage academic discussion that challenges the candidate, not only in terms of the academic content of the doctoral work, but also on the candidate's ability to place the work in a wider scientific context. During the public defence, the opponents and the candidate are encouraged to challenge each other academically in a respectful manner.

4.3 Assessment committee's assessment and recommendation

The assessment committee's recommendation culminates in a conclusion stating whether the defence of the thesis should be approved or not.

If a doctoral thesis is found worthy of public defence, this will normally lead to the defence being approved for a doctoral degree. If new points come to light during the defence which cause uncertainty among the committee and which cannot be clarified during the public defence, the committee should clarify and assess the potential implications of these before making its final recommendation.

If the core conclusions of the work prove, beyond doubt, not to be valid in view of *new points that come to light during the defence*, the assessment committee must not approve the defence in its recommendation. This also applies if, during the defence, objectionable factors of material significance to the assessment of the work come to light, such as a breach of research ethics norms or good academic practice. If the defence is not approved, the candidate will have one new attempt at a public defence cf. the PhD regulation Section 5-18, second paragraph.