

Guidelines concerning the assessment of doctoral theses and the public defence

Social Sciences Directorate of Doctoral Studies (Directorate of Studies 40)
(as of 23 January 2024)

Dear Reviewer,

The Social Sciences Directorate of Doctoral Studies of the University of Vienna would like to thank you for taking the time to assess a doctoral thesis. In doing so, you are making an important contribution to maintaining and improving the standards of quality of doctoral education at our Faculty.

The following sections provide information about the assessment of a doctoral thesis as well as the public defence, which may take place on site or in a hybrid or entirely online format. If you still have questions or concerns regarding the assessment procedure or the public defence after reading this document, please do not hesitate to contact us at:

StudiesServiceCentre Social Sciences/Doctoral Studies

University of Vienna, Universitätsstraße 7, 1010 Vienna, 6th floor, room: A0628

T: +43-1-4277-491 21

E: doktorat.sozialwissenschaften@univie.ac.at

Contact person: Birgit Muskovich

For further information about the doctoral programme in Social Sciences, please visit the website of the **Vienna Doctoral School of Social Sciences**: vds-sosci.univie.ac.at

General information

- The University of Vienna does not formally distinguish between academic theses taking the form of **a monograph or a collection of papers**. Nevertheless, the Social Sciences Directorate of Doctoral Studies recommends that doctoral candidates decide on the format of their doctoral thesis early in the research process and provides guidelines for both forms. If you have not received the **Guidelines of the Social Sciences Directorate of Doctoral Studies concerning doctoral theses**, please download them [here](#). Whether doctoral candidates submit a monograph or a collection of papers must not be taken as a criterion for assessment.
- At the University of Vienna, a doctoral thesis is reviewed by **two experts from the relevant discipline** who are not supervisors of the doctoral thesis. Together with their supervisors, doctoral candidates can propose three experts to act as reviewers. The supervisor/s ask the suggested persons whether they are willing and able to assess the doctoral thesis within the given time frame. Supervisor/s should also serve as contact persons during the review process, if questions arise. The Studienpräses, the officer responsible for the implementation of the study

law, selects and appoints two reviewers in consultation with the Social Sciences Directorate of Doctoral Studies.

- One reviewer should be an **external person** (external = not employed with the University of Vienna). The second reviewer may be a member of the University of Vienna. Both internal as well as external reviewers have to be professors, or have an equivalent qualification, or be habilitated (see section 15, para. 2 of the [Statutes of the University of Vienna](#)). The candidate and the external reviewer may not have regular research-related contact (e. g. joint publications or research projects). A supervisor can act as a reviewer only in special cases. In this case, the second reviewer has to be from outside the University of Vienna.
- Both reviewers receive an **electronic copy** of the academic thesis at the same time. A hardcover copy can be supplied on request but needs to be returned after the assessment.
- In accordance with the Statutes of the University of Vienna, reviewers have a maximum of **four months** to assess the thesis and write their review. In the interest of the candidate, the reviewers are kindly requested to complete the assessment as quickly as possible.
- Reviews have to be submitted to the StudiesServiceCentre Social Sciences/Doctoral Studies (doktorat.sozialwissenschaften@univie.ac.at). As soon as both reviews have been submitted, the StudiesServiceCentre forwards them to **the candidate, both reviewers and the supervisor/s**.
- Only if both reviewers submit a positive review of the doctoral thesis, the doctoral candidate may register for the **public defence**. The reviewers of a doctoral thesis usually serve as members of the examination committee during the public defence.
- If a reviewer assesses the thesis **negatively**, the thesis is given to an additional reviewer. If the third reviewer assesses the thesis negatively as well, the overall result is negative. In this case, doctoral candidates have to revise their doctoral thesis before they can resubmit it.

Review and grading

Each reviewer is requested to produce an independent review in which they determine whether the doctoral thesis meets the **criteria of a positive assessment**. According to the [Curriculum](#), a doctoral thesis “serves to demonstrate the candidate’s ability to master academic topics independently” and is “expected to be of a quality to merit publication, at least in parts, in accordance with the standards in the field of research.”

The thesis has to be assessed according to a scale of 1 to 5 in accordance with the **Austrian grading system**. These grades are defined as follows:

1	EXCELLENT	Above-average level of achievement with only minor weaknesses, the best possible grade	PASS
2	GOOD	Generally good piece of work but with some weaknesses	
3	SATISFACTORY	Generally sound work with a number of substantial weaknesses, corresponds in all respects to average requirements	
4	SUFFICIENT	Performance meets minimum requirements for a doctoral thesis, the lowest passing grade	
5	INSUFFICIENT	Thesis has serious deficiencies, substantial improvement necessary	FAIL

In their report, reviewers must provide reasons for the grade they award. In the doctoral programme in Social Sciences, reviews of doctoral theses usually comprise **between three and eight pages**.

Reviewers are requested to cover the following points in their review:

1. Research question, originality and objective of the research
2. Theory, methodology and research design
3. Contribution of the findings to the state-of-the-art and relevance to the research area
4. Significance and quality of the empirical research
5. Research ethics
6. Structure of the thesis
7. Format of the thesis: citation system, overall style, presentation
8. Overall evaluation of the doctoral thesis and grading

Reviewers may include suggestions for revisions to the author for a future publication of the doctoral thesis or parts thereof.

Reviewers receive a remuneration of € 100. Payments are made twice per year.

Public defence

Following the positive assessment of a doctoral thesis, the candidate can register for the public defence. The public defence of a doctoral thesis is the final step in the doctoral programme. The purpose of the public defence is the oral defence of the doctoral thesis, i.e. the theoretical approach, research design, data collection and findings, in front of an examination committee. The candidate should respond to criticism or suggestions that reviewers may have raised in their reviews.

Planning

- The examination committee of a public defence has to comprise at least **three persons**. Usually, the committee consists of the **two reviewers and the chair** of the examination committee. The Directorate of Doctoral Studies appoints the members of the examination committee. The candidate and the supervisor/s need to suggest members for this committee. The thesis supervisor/s may act as a member of the examination committee, but only in exceptional cases. The Directorate of Doctoral Studies recommends that supervisor/s do not act as members of the examination committee.
- Generally, the Director of Studies serves as **chairperson**, but this role can be delegated to another Faculty member who is allowed to supervise doctoral theses. The candidate and the supervisor/s can suggest a chairperson. All members of the examination committee contribute to the grading of the candidate.
- If reviewers cannot attend the public defence in person, the examination may take place in a **hybrid or entirely online format**. Reviewers are kindly asked to inform the StudiesServiceCentre and the candidate as soon as possible if they can only attend the public defence by video conference.

- It is the candidate's and the supervisor/s' responsibility to schedule a **suitable date** for the public defence. The supervisor/s first schedule two to three possible dates in consultation with the reviewers, the candidate as well as the representative of the respective discipline within the Directorate of Doctoral Studies or the chairperson they suggest. Afterwards, the candidate notifies the StudiesServiceCentre about the suggested date and the names of the members of the examination committee by submitting the form "Registration for doctoral thesis defence".

Procedure

- A public defence lasts about **90 minutes**.
- It starts with a welcoming note by the chairperson including an explanation of the procedure.
- Afterwards, the candidate holds a **20-minute presentation** in which they must clearly present the thesis project and substantiate the research design and findings. It is important that candidates specifically address the comments in the reviews and defend their doctoral thesis in terms of its academic merit.
- This is followed by a **discussion between the candidate and the examination committee** which is usually opened by the person chairing the examination committee. The reviewers have the opportunity to ask the candidate more in-depth and advanced questions. The supervisor/s are only part of this discussion and can grade if they are members of the examination committee.
- The public defence is followed by an **internal discussion** about the grading of the public defence among the members of the examination committee. Afterwards, the chairperson communicates the outcome of the defence to the candidate, often together with a short feedback.
- The chairperson fills out the form "Minutes of the final oral examination" including the grading of the public defence and submits it to the StudiesServiceCentre. If the defence takes place in person, all members of the examination committee need to sign the form.

Outcome

- Each member of the examination committee gives a **numerical grade (1–5)** on the entire examination (i. e. the presentation and the discussion). This grade is separate from and unrelated to the grades given in the reviews.
- If the members of the committee come to a majority decision, i.e. the majority of them award the same grade, this grade will be the final grade (e. g. 1, 1, 2 → majority decision for "excellent"). If the members do not come to a majority decision, the arithmetic mean will be used to determine the final grade (e. g. 1, 3, 5 → arithmetic mean $1+3+5=9$ divided by $3 = 3$). If the result is a value whose decimal place is less than or equal to 5, it has to be rounded down to the better grade. The result of the assessment is a numerical grade.
- Following the successful public defence, doctoral candidates are officially awarded the academic title "**Doktor/Doktorin der Philosophie (Dr. phil.)**" (doctor of philosophy).

Travel expenses

The University of Vienna supports and encourages the participation of external reviewers in examination committees and reimburses a maximum of **€ 700 per public defence** for this purpose to cover travel expenses and accommodation costs. This figure is intended as a maximum amount and should, as far as possible, not be exceeded. The guest is responsible for booking and paying for tickets and accommodation. The following expenses will be reimbursed:

Flight → Economy Class	Upon submission of the following documents: e-ticket + copy of the direct debit order, boarding pass and invoice
Train trip → First Class	Upon submission of the ticket and corresponding invoice (if issued)
Arrival by car	An amount corresponding to the cost of a first-class train ticket
Transfer costs	Costs for transfer by public transport to the airport/train station
Accommodation	In general, and if necessary due to the date/time of the public defence, accommodation costs will be covered for one night. Many hotels close to the University of Vienna offer special rates for the University of Vienna. You are at liberty to choose your own hotel, but budget restrictions mean that the University can only refund a maximum amount of € 100 per night.

Please note that the University of Vienna does not reimburse more than one overnight stay. It does also not reimburse per diem fees, meals, mileage costs or parking fees.

Please send your travel expense documents to the Office of the Studienpräses (reisekosten.doktorat@univie.ac.at) upon your return. Your travel expenses will be reimbursed upon receipt of your receipts and bank account details (IBAN and BIC/SWIFT, account number, bank code, bank name). If you have any questions regarding the reimbursement of travel expenses, please contact us at:

Office of the Studienpräses

University of Vienna, Universitätsring 1, 1010 Vienna

T: +43-1-4277-121 55

E: reisekosten.doktorat@univie.ac.at

Contact person: Claudia Fritz-Larott