

Dissertation review procedure - The role of supervisors, Doctorate Committee chair and members, and Dean

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Regular procedure

(see below for the procedure in the case of a proposal to award the doctoral degree marked "Cum Laude")

Supervisors: Invite the DC members

- One of the supervisors asks potential Doctorate Committee (DC) members (including the chair) and informs them on their duties. A sample letter is available¹.
- Please review the regulations for the composition of the DC and use the form provided by the Graduate School².
- Send the proposal for the composition of the DC to the Dean (graduate.school.fsw@vu.nl) using the form. After preliminary approval by the Dean, forward the approval mail and the form to graduate.school.fsw@vu.nl. The Graduate School organizes the advice of the Pool of Professors.

Supervisors: Approve the portfolio³

Graduate School: Approve the portfolio

- The Graduate School verifies that the PhD portfolio meets the requirements. The approval is recorded in Hora Finita.

Dean: Approve the composition of the DC

Supervisors: Approve the thesis

- When the dissertation is ready for review, the supervisors justify their decision (Doctorate Regulations⁴, Article 23.1).

¹ <https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/more-about/the-graduate-school-of-social-sciences> > Information for supervisors > Sample letter for inviting someone to become member of a Doctorate Committee

² <https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/more-about/the-graduate-school-of-social-sciences> > Completion of the PhD trajectory: from dissertation to defense > Proposal for the designation of a Doctorate Committee (fill-in document)

³ A portfolio is a personal record that describes what the PhD candidate is able to do and has done, complementary to what the dissertation demonstrates. The components are: section 1. Compliance with rules for the implementation of the investigation: Data accountability; Ethics test of research; Authorship – compliance with rules for the research; Open access to the thesis; Duration of the research; Quality of the PhD candidate as researcher; Plagiarism check of thesis; Presenting and discussing the research; Scientific attitude; section 3. Training followed by the PhD candidate.

⁴ <https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/more-about/docotorate-regulations>

- They motivate their decision using the rubric⁵ and the FSS criteria⁶ as an aid to assess the quality of the dissertation, including those for the size of the thesis and publication of the results.
- Divide the motivation into three parts, in accordance with the task of the DC members as requested in Hora Finita (namely 1. Content, theory building and application; 2. Research design and methodology; 3. Academic skills). Unfortunately, this classification does not fit very well with that of the components of the rubric.
- It is recommended not to use previous publication of dissertation results as an argument; after all, the DC members are asked for an independent judgment.
- Take responsibility for the portfolio and include the complete justification in the portfolio.

Hora Finita: Send the thesis to the DC members

Chair of the DC: Inform the DC members⁷

- Inform the members of what is to be assessed
 - o Content and academic quality of the thesis is central;
 - o Assessment of academic skills by DC members is not feasible because they are predominantly displayed out of sight of the DC members;
 - o Specify how the assessment will be done (in Hora Finita; rating of three criteria is not decisive; final/overall assessment is).
- Inform them about the procedure.
 - o The procedure in brief: if all members advise positively, there is no meeting; if one or more members advise negatively, there is a meeting (online or in person) and the further procedure is outlined (Article 23.6); decision on procedure is always up to Dean;
 - o DC chair writes a report with an opinion to the Dean (Article 23.4);
 - o Total is 30 days available, so DC members report well before the deadline expires;
 - o This report and the individual reviews are sent to the DC members;
 - o When the thesis is approved by the Dean, the candidate can defend the thesis;
 - o Preferably the full DC opposes at the defense;
 - o The opposition and defense is academic, but the decision for the award has already been made (for exceptions: see below) (about a possible cum laude is decided after the defense);
 - o When the dissertation is defended, the DC is dissolved (no notice is given about this);
 - o During the procedure, a DC member cannot withdraw from the committee, unless the Dean decides otherwise.
- Send the regulations and again rubric and rules (only the link to documents)
- Send along the motivation for approval by the supervisors, embedded in the portfolio

Note. This is manual work – it cannot be done via Hora Finita. A sample letter will follow.

Chair of the DC: General instructions for acting during the assessment procedure

- Overall, take the committee seriously. They spend a lot of time on it, are experts and deserve to be treated respectfully. The decision that is finally made is based on intersubjectivity, recognizing that there may be different views of science, judgments about quality, and weighting of quality aspects.

⁵ <https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/more-about/the-graduate-school-of-social-sciences> > Completion of the PhD trajectory: from dissertation to defense > Assessment of the quality and scope of the PhD thesis

⁶ <https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/more-about/the-graduate-school-of-social-sciences> > Requirements for the thesis > Rules for the PhD thesis

⁷ Email addresses are available via the Graduate School

- Ensure that the Dean is well informed during the procedure; the chair reports the DC's recommendations and findings to the Dean in a timely manner, by email or telephone/conversation, if there may be any need to do so.
- The Graduate School sends reminders to DC members and contacts chair and promoters as necessary. Stay in contact with the Graduate School (graduate.school.fsw@vu.nl).

Chair of the DC, after review by DC: Count the votes

- If all DC members recommend positively: the chair writes a report that includes a summary of the voting ratio, a summary of the substantive judgments of the DC members, and an overarching one on quality. This report is stored in Hora Finita. The Dean decides (Article 24.1).
- If one member advises negatively and all other members advise positively (Article 23.6):
 - o Chair ascertains overriding reason for negative recommendation; assesses this himself, focusing in particular on reparability (Is improvement needed? Is repair possible?).
 - o Chair contacts DC member who voted against: discussion of objection. How serious is it? Is repair possible?
 - o Chair calls DC together (online or in person meeting)⁸; sends along individual judgments of DC members.

Agenda for this meeting:

 - Start by asking for the opinion of DC members who advised positively on the objections of member who advised negatively. Were these objections already recognized and set aside? Are the objections new and are they not or are they valid for these DC members?
 - Ask the DC member who advised negatively to provide an explanation of the negative advice and a response to the opinion of DC members who advised positively on the objections of member who advised negatively.
 - Discuss the reparability of the criticism, based on the chair's own analysis (and possibly the opinion of supervisors).
 - Ask the other DC members to give their opinion on reparability.
 - Conclude with a DC's advice to the Dean based on a roll call vote: sufficient or insufficient quality of the thesis; no or a possibility to repair defects; specify which defects need to be repaired and - if possible - how they can be repaired.
 - o If unanimous positive recommendation: Chair reports to Dean (via Hora Finita); Dean decides.
 - o If no unanimous positive recommendation and if not repairable: Chair reports to Dean (via Hora Finita); Dean decides (Article 23.8).
 - o If repairable (Article 23.8):
 - Chair reports opinions and findings to Dean, by email or phone/conversation.
 - Chair informs supervisors of outcome of DC deliberation and consults, including whether expectation of reparability is correct.
 - Chair requests revision with new judgment by the supervisors within specified timeframe.
 - Inform DC members about when to expect the revised dissertation, and ask if they would like to set aside time for its review.
 - Updated dissertation is resubmitted to DC (via Hora Finita) for review; note that there is no second round of revision.
 - It is strongly recommended that the candidate write a report of the changes

⁸ The Dean may participate in this consultation. Promoters and candidate are not present to avoid a defense already taking place. The DC may ask questions of promoters and candidate in the advice to the Dean.

- This report cannot be uploaded into Hora Finita as a separate document
 - The easiest way is to combine this report with the updated document (in this order) into one pdf, and upload it;
 - Alternatively, send it by email to DC members (the GSSS can help with this).
- If two or more DC members advise negatively
 - In principle, the same procedure is followed as in the case of one negative vote.
 - If the committee persists in the negative opinion with two or more negative votes by re-vote, the procedure will be followed as described in Article 24.2b and following.

Dean (or in rare cases the College of Deans): Approve or disapprove the thesis

DC, after approval of the thesis: Decide on award of PhD

- The candidate is admitted to the defense.
- The DC decides on the award of the degree by a simple majority. Added opponents have an advisory vote (Article 28.3).
- At least three members of the DC are present (Article 28.6).
- The sentence "Among the factors considered in the decision is the defence of the dissertation by the PhD candidate" (Article 28.7) should be read in the spirit of the following agreements.
 - Even if the defense is moderate or less but scientific, the degree will be awarded based on the previous assessment of the thesis and the PhD portfolio.
 - If a candidate does not take the defense seriously or conducts it non-scientifically, the DC will make a decision on awarding the degree.
 - If the candidate is deceased and the dissertation was approved by the DC while alive, the College of Deans may decide that the degree will be awarded without a defense.

Cum laude

The Cum Laude (CL) designation may be awarded if the dissertation has excellent academic quality (Article 1).⁹ The rubric for assessing the quality of a thesis (including at the level of 'excellent') is described in: <https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/more-about/the-graduate-school-of-social-sciences> > Completion of the PhD trajectory: from dissertation to defense > Assessment of the quality and scope of the PhD thesis.

Chair of the DC

- The DC chair is also a member, and as such has the same rights and obligations as other members.
- Ensure that the Dean is well informed during the procedure; the chair reports the DC's recommendations and findings to the Dean in a timely manner, by email or telephone/conversation, if there may be any need to do so.

Step 1

- a. One or more of the supervisors may propose to award the doctoral degree marked "cum laude". This is indicated when the thesis is approved (in Hora Finita). The proposal is substantiated.

⁹ Article 32 states "If the doctoral candidate has demonstrated outstanding competence in the dissertation ..." (in Dutch: "meer dan gewone bekwaamheid ..."). The term 'excellent' should prevail over other terms.

- b. A member of the DC (the chair is equal to other members of the DC in this regard) may make the proposal to award CL. This is indicated when advising positively on the thesis (in Hora Finita). The proposal is substantiated.

Step 2

If one of the supervisors has made the proposal (step 1a), the DC chair informs the other DC members in a neutral and anonymous manner.¹⁰ As much as possible, the DC members' opinions are independent of those of other stakeholders, but they are fully informed. There is no indication of how many or which of the supervisors made the proposal. The motivation is included.

Step 3

After all DC members have reviewed the thesis, the chair will consider whether any of them propose to award CL.

Step 4

If either one of the supervisors or one of the DC members proposes to award CL, a recommendation is made by the DC to the Dean within 14 days after all judgments of the DC members have been received (Article 31.3; clarified). The chair of the DC convenes a meeting of the DC members. The Dean may attend. The chair informs the DC members of the proposal, indicates which DC member or DC members proposed it, and shares the reasoning. If, in the opinion of the chair, the reasoning is not sufficient, she or he requests further argument from the DC member or supervisor involved.

Step 5

At the DC meeting, the proposal is discussed, and a vote is taken. If more than one member opposes attribution, the proposal is rejected and the procedure is terminated (Article 31.3). If one of the supervisors had proposed the CL, the DC chair informs her or him of the negative decision.

Step 6

In case one DC member or no DC members are against the proposal, two referees are approached (Article 31.4). The dean chooses the referees¹¹, asks them for advice, and receives the report; DC members are not informed at that time.

Step 7

Before the defense of the thesis, the DC meets, and the proposal for awarding CL is submitted to the DC members, other opponents, the supervisors, and the other professors of Vrije Universiteit. The opinions of the referees are also submitted (Article 31. 7).

Step 8

In the meeting of the DC after the defense, the DC decides not only whether to award the degree of Doctor or PhD, but also whether to award CL. The latter decision also considers the quality of the defense. Only DC members have the right to vote; opponents who are not members of the DC, supervisors and the Dean do not vote. Because there is limited time for this meeting, priority is given to the (brief) arguments of DC members over the opinions of other attendees. The Cum laude designation will not be awarded if more than one of the voting members at the meeting votes against it.

¹⁰ The Graduate School can help by providing a sample letter, or sending the mail.

¹¹ The Dean may ask supervisors, faculty professors or third parties for suggestions for names, preferably for more than two potential referees.

Step 9

If CL is not awarded, it will not be communicated to anyone outside the meeting. If CL is awarded, it is not communicated to the candidate during the meeting, but only during the public ceremony. (It is unclear when the predicate is recorded on the diploma – we have to ask the beadle).