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## Insight essay

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# Insights for Opponents on fostering interaction in the public defence of a doctoral dissertation

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## Abstract

The public defence of a doctoral dissertation is a multifaceted, demanding interaction situation, in which the Doctoral Candidate and the Opponent have a conversation about the Candidate's doctoral dissertation. The public defence is an honoured tradition and, in many countries, one of the key celebratory moments in academia. In Finland, the event is public and rather formal. The public defence has received little focus in research and academic discussion from the perspective of social interaction, in which the Opponent has a central role. The interpersonal communication competence of the Opponent largely determines the nature of the public defence. Hence, there is need for guidelines and support for the Opponents' communication. The aim of our article is to describe the typical conventions of Finnish public defence for those unfamiliar with them and provide insights into public defence as an interaction situation. Additionally, we offer communication guidelines for the Opponents on how to construct effective and appropriate interaction in public defence, and help those granted the honour to prepare and conduct their duties competently. We cover both the interpersonal conversation between the Candidate and the Opponent, and the engagement with the listeners.

**KEYWORDS:** communication, doctoral defence, doctoral viva, Opponent, public defence, social interaction

## Celebrating research with a public conversation

Doctoral researchers produce a great number of peer reviewed publications in the Finnish universities. With rare exceptions, all doctoral dissertations are openly published. They may be article-based dissertations, monographs or, in some fields, a combination of artistic or practical chapters and reflective chapters.

The doctoral researcher's dissertation process culminates into the public defence of their research. Approximately 1,700 public defences are held in Finland annually (Vipunen, 2018–2022). It means that weekly around 35 doctoral researchers (hereafter Candidates<sup>1</sup>) and their Opponents prepare for and engage in academic debate about the studied phenomenon. The number increases in the up-coming years as the Finnish government allocated more funding for doctoral education (Valtioneuvosto, 2023). The public defence is a centuries-long academic tradition. It can also be referred to as doctoral defence, public examination, viva, doctoral viva, and viva voce.

The public defence is a unique interaction situation, which in the Finnish context has elements of both argumentative conversation and public speaking. The event is formal, celebratory, and open for everyone to attend. Its nature, goals, and duration require interpersonal communication competence from the key participants. Generally, Opponent plays a central role in shaping the atmosphere and overall spirit of the public defence (Keskinen, 2012). Opponent's communication and proceeding pace, the statements they make, the questions they ask, and their nonverbal communication influence greatly the construction of the interaction. For aforementioned reasons, it is surprising that there is hardly any guidance, institutional

training, or support available for Opponents to prepare and conduct their honorary role effectively in public defences (Tan, 2023). Furthermore, little research exists on the social interaction in public defences, especially from the viewpoint of Opponents (Wisker et al., 2022).

Previous research has primarily centred on understanding Candidates' experiences of public defences (Chen, 2011; Lantsoght, 2021a, 2021b, 2022; Share, 2016), and offering them various survival strategies and how-to-guides (Murray, 2015). Supportive online videos have been created to help prepare, rehearse, and strengthen interpersonal communication competence in and around the public defence (Virtanen, 2019, 2020). Some studies have explored public defences from the perspective of Custos—the chair of the event (Kumar et al., 2021, 2024). Additionally, research has examined some aspects of social interaction in public defences, such as the uses and functions of laughter and humour (Mežek, 2018) and the ambiguity between the ceremonial and evaluative nature of defences (van der Heide et al., 2016). Recently, attention has been paid to the changes in processes and experiences (Wisker et al., 2022) as well as on the challenges and benefits of remote public defences (Allen & Williams, 2022).

Some studies have concentrated on Opponents' various roles in public defences (Keskinen, 2012), their expectations of Candidates' oral performance (Tan, 2022), and their learning experiences related to assessment practices in public defences (Tan, 2023). These studies suggest that Opponents expect Candidates to manifest confident, interactional behaviour, and provide credible and convincing responses (Tan, 2022), and that Opponents learn public defence practices mainly from their own experiences and by trial and error (Tan, 2023). While these studies shed light on Opponents'

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<sup>1</sup>We have omitted the use of articles from the three key participants in the public defence—Candidate, Opponent, and Custos—, and use them as proper nouns hereafter.

various roles, expectations, and learning experiences, more attention is needed to understand social interaction per se in public defences, and particularly the communicative role of Opponent.

In our article, we aim at describing typical conventions of the Finnish public defences for those unfamiliar with them and deepening the understanding of a public defence as an interaction situation. We offer communication guidelines for Opponents on how to construct effective and appropriate interaction in public defence and help those granted the honour to prepare and conduct their duties competently. Furthermore, Custos, Candidate, and others interested in public defences can make use of the article in learning more about the unique, multifaceted interaction situation.

The formats of public defence may differ from country to country (Lantsoght, 2023; Murray, 2015). Also, different universities and disciplines may have their own customs and traditions. Therefore, a careful examination of the detailed instructions in each context is highly recommended. Even though we focus on the Finnish context here, the learnings of social interaction and interpersonal communication competence can also be applied to other traditions of the public defence.

## The role of the Opponent in the public defence

All parties involved in a public defence have unique roles. *Candidate* has conducted research for their doctoral degree, and they present their work for public examination and argue for its merits. *Opponent*—or sometimes two Opponents—is an invited scholar who leads the examination conversation. Opponent is from a

different university than Candidate and has not worked closely with them. *Custos* is the chair of the event, appointed by the faculty. Custos does not participate in the conversation per se, but rather, opens and closes the event. They chair the possible questions from the listeners at the end of the event. Often, Custos is the doctoral supervisor of the Candidate or a professor at the department.

The *listeners* are other academics, students, family and friends, possibly journalists, industry representatives, and others interested in the research. Instead of using the concept “audience,” we use the concept “listeners”. According to the National Communication Association (1998, pp. 9–10), “[l]istening is the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and nonverbal messages. People listen in order to comprehend information, critique and evaluate a message, show empathy for the feelings expressed by others, or appreciate a performance.” Taking that perspective, the listeners cocreate the interaction situation with those who produce most of the content at the public defence, namely Candidate and Opponent. They too are utilising their competence in listening. Recently, live streams have attracted an increased number of listeners. There may be dozens to a few hundred participants, both onsite and online.

Significant public conversations on research do not just happen. They are the product of conscientious preparation. Those with specific duties—Candidate, Opponent, and Custos—should discuss and agree on the application of university guidelines. The parties can actively contribute to the success of the public defence: Carefully review the procedures and goals, and rehearse parts individually (e.g., asking questions) and rehearse other parts together (e.g., entering and exiting the event hall).

The communicative role of Opponent is crucial in the public defence. Opponent leads the conversation and examines components of the research process and the dissertation in interaction with Candidate. A competent Opponent ensures that the doctoral dissertation and Candidate are fairly treated during the defence: Both the merits and the shortcomings of the research should be discussed. The purpose of the public defence is to verify that Candidate has conducted the research themselves, that they are knowledgeable of the research literature and scientific methods used, and that they can critically review the decisions they made. In addition, the aim is to publicly review the content of the research, promote the dissertation's findings, and celebrate research as distinct from the everyday tasks of the academic work.

Opponent has a highly impactful role in making sure that the goals of the event are met. For example, an article-based dissertation comprises peer-reviewed publications, or also some in-review or conference publications, and an introductory chapter. Consequently, the papers have already been reviewed by members of the academic community. Therefore, instead of merely examining already published papers, the public defence should examine the compilation of studies, how the dissertation's goals were met, and whether the study meets the level required for a doctoral degree.

In the Finnish public defences, it is important to acknowledge that a doctoral dissertation is published prior to the event. It means that the discussion during the public defence is not suggestive of edits to a dissertation that will be later revised and finalised. Rather, the work is already printed and published when defended in public.

Opponent's role also includes considering the different purposes of the public defence. Since the event is open for everyone to attend, it provides visibility for Candidate's study and latest research, promotes open science and societal interaction, as well as increases research impact. Public defences can also function as learning experiences for students and other listeners, and they can strengthen collaboration and knowledge exchange between universities and various societal actors nationally and internationally. Along with individual researchers, public defences are important celebrations for advances in the disciplines of research.

### **Public defence as an interpersonal conversation and a public speaking situation**

The public defence can be characterised both as an interpersonal conversation between Opponent and Candidate, and as a public speaking situation that includes listeners. As a conversation, public defence is asymmetric and institutional by nature. Candidate's research, thinking, and writing is subject to assessment. Opponent is senior to Candidate, and chooses the topics discussed.

The asymmetry in public defences is well described by Keskinen (2012). Candidate and Opponent have different positions: While Candidate is the expert on the topic and the details of their doctoral dissertation, Opponent has more experience in conducting and evaluating research in general. Additionally, Opponent controls the situation: It is their right and duty to guide the conversation—ask questions that Candidate answers, and adhere to the timetable, for instance. The asymmetry is reinforced by the fact that Candidate is likely to defend a dissertation for the first time, whereas Opponent is

not the one under scrutiny and may have functioned as Opponent more than once. However, the public defence can be significant, exciting, and possibly anxiety-raising for both Candidate and Opponent. The public defence impacts the reputation of individual researchers, research groups, and the host-university (van der Heide et al., 2016). This adds to the pressure and weight of the event.

Public defence can also be defined as an institutional conversation (Drew & Heritage, 1992). It has specific goals and unique turn-taking rules that differ from everyday discussions. The conversation is structured with formalities, and the interaction is framed with meaning and lexicon characteristic to academia.

While the conversation between Opponent and Candidate is interpersonal, it is intended to be seen, heard, and evaluated by other people—the listeners. Thus, public defence can also be perceived as public speaking that requires presentation skills. Much like in a television interview, participants are having an interpersonal conversation while being aware of the listeners (Nuolijärvi & Tiittula, 2000).

The multifaceted nature of the public defence demands diverse interpersonal communication competence from Opponent (Laajalahti, 2014; Thompson, 2009). According to the commonly accepted definition, interpersonal communication competence consists of cognitive, behavioural, and affective dimensions. Consequently, interpersonal communication competence encompasses three broad sets of factors: knowledge, skills, and attitude/motivation/courage. Additionally, effectiveness and appropriateness are widely regarded as the primary criteria for assessing these three dimensions of competence (Laajalahti, 2014, 2022; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2011).

A public defence requires both task-oriented and relationship-oriented competence from Opponent. Opponent utilises interpersonal communication competence, for example, to ask dialogue-inviting questions, listen to Candidate, ask relevant follow-up questions, foster a constructive atmosphere, accommodate their communication, support and challenge Candidate, consider the listeners, and manage time, to name a few. No amount of knowledge or skills, however, matters unless Opponent is motivated to put them into practice and has a purposeful attitude towards the event and participants. Thus, next to knowledge and skills, Opponents' motivation and attitude are highly important, and they have an influence on the way in which the interaction is structured.

Additionally, the social interaction in a public defence is characterised by a set of dialectical tensions that require Opponent to possess specific interpersonal communication competence (for relational dialectics, see e.g., Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Baxter & Norwood, 2015). The tensions are communicative in nature, which means that Opponent attempts to accomplish several communication goals at the same time. For example, the choreography of the public defence benefits from a certain amount of formality. Yet, Opponent can produce informality with approachability cues such as smiles. Also, Opponent needs to balance between the requirements of expert communication with academic peers and the popularisation of science (Kiikeri & Ylikoski, 2004), and decide how to handle the ambiguity between celebration and assessment in the defence (van der Heide et al., 2016). They might experience the push and pull of certainty and uncertainty as well as closeness and distance (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Furthermore, they need to negotiate the extent to which they perceive themselves

as collaborators or competitors in the conversation (Laajalahti, 2014). Additionally, Opponent necessitates interpersonal communication competence to balance between the tension of equality and authority in relation to Candidate (Laajalahti, 2014).

## The choreography of the public defence

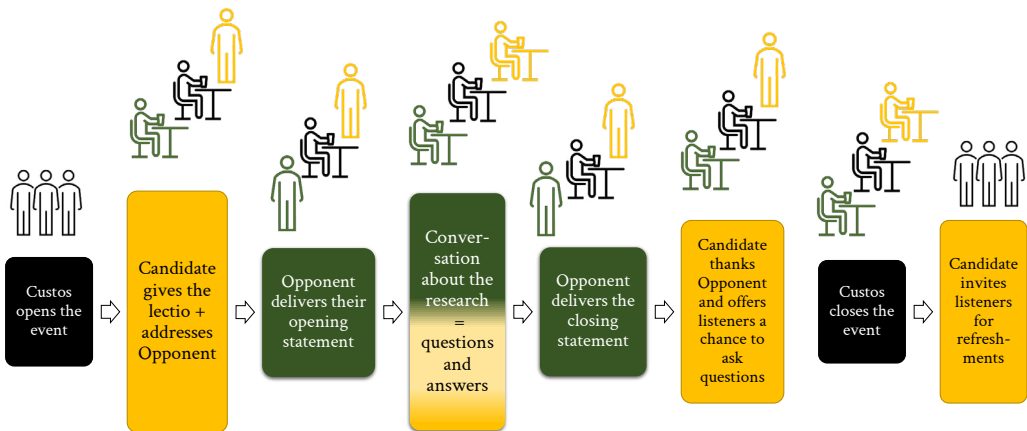
Since the participants of a public defence have different roles and relationships with each other, the interaction during the event deserves attention and careful preparation. There may be some local variation in the formalities but in most Finnish universities the format is rather standard. The choreography of the public defence is summarised in Figure 1.

A typical venue for the public defence is an auditorium or a lecture hall. Candidate, Custos, and Opponent enter the room. The listeners stand until Custos has officially opened the

event. Next, Candidate gives their *lectio prae-cursoria* (hereafter lectio). Lectio is the introductory lecture, which is targeted for a heterogeneous group of listeners. Lectio may not last more than 20 minutes. Once given, Candidate asks Opponent to present their observations and critical comments on the dissertation.

Opponent stands and gives their opening statement, and after, they invite Candidate to be seated. They begin the conversation about the dissertation. Opponent asks Candidate questions about the dissertation, which Opponent has prepared beforehand. The questions give Candidate an opportunity to showcase their expertise, experience, and the study's findings. Opponent decides when the research work has been discussed sufficiently and they are ready to give their closing statement.

After, Candidate thanks Opponent and offers the listeners a chance to ask questions. Listeners should request their turn from Custos. Custos chairs the audience-questions after which



**Figure 1. The Choreography of the Public Defence**

*Note.* Custos opens the event. Candidate gives the lectio + addresses Opponent. Opponent delivers the opening statement. Questions and answers, i.e., the conversation about the research takes place. Opponent delivers the closing statement. Candidate thanks Opponent and offers listeners a chance to ask questions. Candidate invites listeners for refreshments.

they announce the event closed. Candidate then invites the listeners for beverages outside the event hall. The listeners stand while the three key participants exit. Commonly, in the evening, Candidate throws a banquet or dinner to honour Opponent.

In Finland, the tradition of the public defence has recently been shaped both by the global pandemic and attempts at sustainability. During the pandemic, the defences were streamed online with only Candidate, Opponent, and Custos in the event hall, or they were held completely online (see Figure 2). Since the online events were successful, many universities have continued to stream the public defences, and some public defences are organised fully remotely. Additionally, some Opponents have chosen not to fly across continents but rather carry their duties via remote connection, which allows more flexible scheduling as well. The convenience of virtuality should not, however, take precedence over the Candidate's right to

engage in an academic in-depth conversation in front of listeners in the event hall to celebrate their achievement.

Both the public defences organised onsite and those utilising remote technology have potential for success (Allen & Williams, 2022). The prestige and outcome of the event depends on many factors, including the preparation, knowledge of the context and the medium, communication skills, and attitude. For example, mediated immediacy (e.g., approachability, nonverbal warmth, friendliness) in general can be achieved by the equal frame size and close-ups on remote defences to support interpersonal communication (Kuuluvainen et al., 2021, 2023). To ensure a ceremonious academic atmosphere the facilities and amenities such as microphones, Wi-Fi connections, and virtual backgrounds need to be planned and tested beforehand (for guidelines, Allen & Williams, 2022).



**Figure 2. Screenshot from a Streamed Public Defence**

*Note.* The Opponent, Associate Professor Agnete Vabø from Oslo Metropolitan University, delivers her opening statement while the Custos, University Lecturer Elias Pekkola (seated) and the Doctoral Candidate Tea Vellamo listen. Vellamo defended her doctoral dissertation in the field of Administrative Sciences at Tampere University's Faculty of Management and Business September 2, 2022, at 12.

## Opponent guidelines for constructing effective and appropriate interaction in the public defence

The following communication guidelines have been designed to support Opponents in constructing effective and appropriate interaction in public defences. We begin with the guidelines related to the pre-prepared speeches, namely the opening and closing statements. We further explicate guidelines that assist Opponents in directing their attention to social interaction—considering both the interpersonal conversation with Candidate as well as engaging with the listeners.

### Opening statement: Guidelines for preparation and delivery

Opponent's opening statement is given immediately after Candidate's *lectio praecursoria*. Candidate typically says: "I ask you, honoured NN [title and name], as the Opponent appointed by the Faculty of X, to present the observations you consider appropriate for the dissertation". It signals to Opponent that it is their turn. The appropriate length of the opening statement is a few minutes, and it is delivered standing when possible. It is advisable to write the statement word-for-word to honour the formal and celebratory nature of the event.

Traditional topics for Opponent's opening statement include characterisation of the research field, brief reference to the history, development and traditions of the research field, the positioning of the dissertation topic in the field, the phenomenon's topicality, the purpose, necessity, and novelty of the dissertation as well as scientific and societal relevance and impact

of the topic, and similar general matters. For example, 450 words takes approximately three minutes to deliver in English. The opening statement sets the tone for the conversation and introduces the communication style of Opponent.

Opponent does well to prepare a brief description of the dissertation's structure, for example, to recount that the work comprises published peer-reviewed articles and an introductory chapter. However, if Candidate already addressed the structure in their *lectio*, Opponent may leave out the description from their opening statement. Hence, careful preparation of the opening statement and active listening during the *lectio* is important. There is no need to reference in detail the goals or the methods used in the dissertation. The purpose of the opening statement is to describe and lay ground for the following conversation rather than comment or criticise the work. If there are two Opponents, only one of them gives the opening statement.

In terms of words used, Opponent can start their opening statement by thanking *Custos* and the faculty or university for inviting them for the honourable role. For example:

First, I would like to thank the Faculty of X of X University for giving me the pleasure and the honour of acting as a Pre-Examiner of this study, which the Candidate has intended as a doctoral dissertation, and for being invited to function as an Opponent of this work today.

At the end of the opening statement, Opponent is encouraged to look at Candidate and indicate the transition to the conversation by saying: "Let us now begin the conversation to examine the dissertation in detail" or "We now begin to examine how the objectives of the dissertation have been met". Opponent can also indicate

nonverbally that the conversation is about to begin by turning toward Candidate, smiling, and nodding or gesturing to be seated. Both take a seat before the conversation begins.

### **Closing statement: Guidelines for preparation and delivery**

The time for the closing statement is determined by Opponent. At the end of the conversation, Opponent may phrase the transition as follows: “I am ready to give my closing statement”. Opponent’s closing statement is brief: In many cases, five minutes is appropriate. The closing statement is prepared beforehand. Yet, we recommend delivering it in a conversational tone. If there are two Opponents, only one gives the closing statement.

Since the details of the dissertation have been covered in the conversation, the closing statement may include an assessment of the dissertation’s position and relevance in the field, its theoretical framework, the conduct of the research, the results, and the conclusions, among others, summarising its merits and main limitations. Opponent can also describe their experience in the conversation with Candidate, for example: “Today, the Candidate has exhibited great ability to argue for the choices made in the dissertation”. The idea of a closing statement is not to introduce new points of criticism; Candidate must be given an opportunity to defend their dissertation and respond to all criticism.

As their last words, Opponent clearly states whether the research can be accepted as a doctoral dissertation. The statement does not suggest a grade. However, Opponent can indicate the quality of the dissertation by using adjectives, especially when the dissertation is done

well and has been defended with merit. In practice, the wording could be, for example:

Even if I have raised some critical issues on the NN’s [title and name] dissertation, the researcher shows the ability to use scientific methods independently and skillfully, and to produce new research knowledge. The study forms a coherent whole and excellently meets the criteria for doctoral dissertation. I am pleased to propose to the Faculty of X to accept the dissertation of NN [title and name] as doctoral dissertation.

Summaries of the guidelines for preparing and giving the opening and closing statements are presented in Table 1.

### **Building interaction with Candidate**

Opponent can support effective and appropriate interaction with Candidate in several ways. First, they can ensure that both the task- and relationship-oriented objectives of the interaction are met. Task-oriented objectives are, for example, evaluating the research, asking clear, thought-provoking questions, and managing the time. Relationship-oriented objectives include, for example, fostering a productive, supportive, and respectful academic atmosphere, offering encouragement, and giving positive feedback when warranted. It is Opponent’s role to facilitate interaction that allows Candidate to showcase their knowledge and proficiency to the full extent.

Because of the demanding nature of the situation, Candidate may experience high levels of performance anxiety. It impacts the cognitive capacity to listen and construct messages. Opponent can support the conversation by making sure their questions are coherent, the turn-taking moments are clear, and that they

**Table 1. Opponent's Pre-prepared Speeches: Guidelines for Preparation and Delivery**

Opening statement	Closing statement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start with thanking the host university.</li> <li>• Continue by addressing general issues, including characterising the research field, its history, development, and traditions, positioning the dissertation topic in the field, assessing the topicality of the research phenomenon, elucidating the purpose, necessity, and novelty of the dissertation, and emphasising the relevance and impact of the topic (e.g., scientifically, societally, for industry).</li> <li>• End with inviting Candidate to start the conversation verbally and accompany it with nonverbal cues (e.g., turning towards Candidate and nodding).</li> <li>• The opening statement is written and rehearsed beforehand, delivered standing, and can only take a few minutes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Present concise assessment of the dissertation's position and relevance in the field, its theoretical framework, the conduct of the research, the results and conclusions, summarising its merits and main limitations.</li> <li>• Use adjectives to describe the dissertation and Candidate's accomplishments in the conversation.</li> <li>• End with stating clearly whether the research can be accepted as a doctoral dissertation.</li> <li>• Communicate nonverbally your acknowledgement of Candidate's achievement (e.g., with a congratulatory smile).</li> <li>• The closing statement should not introduce any new criticism.</li> <li>• It is written and rehearsed beforehand, delivered standing, and can only take a few minutes.</li> </ul>

communicate active listening as well as a positive attitude towards Candidate. In other words, using appropriate verbal and nonverbal communication is important.

It is good to avoid long sentences, side-tracking, and presenting a bundle of questions at once. A preferable aim is for verbal clarity and coherent speech turns. This allows Candidate to make notes and construct a sound response when it is their turn. Furthermore, nonverbal communication underscores clarity. When Opponent pays attention to the volume and pace of speaking, and holds active eye contact with Candidate, they convey conversational cooperation. Consequently, they receive cues of needed support from Candidate's nonverbal communication in moments of high-performance anxiety or question difficulty. Open facial expressions and smiles, and leaning towards Candidate communicate support, while nods and fol-

low-up questions communicate active listening. Opponent may use purposeful intonation when asking a question, or a pause and a nod to signal to Candidate that it is their turn to speak.

In a public defence, the tone of the conversation should be rather formal, dignified, celebratory, and polite. Nevertheless, light-hearted moments and subtle humour is appreciated. The formal nature of the event calls for polite addresses between the parties. In Finnish, the formal pronoun "te" (*You*) differs from the informal "sinä" (*you*). In addition, titles such as Professor or Doctor can be used. The pronoun may also be the third person, for example, "Did the Candidate consider collecting observational data?" However, the parties can agree before the event to address each other informally. If done, Opponent who has higher status discloses it to the listeners before the public conversation: "We want the listeners to know that I have

suggested to the Candidate that we address each other informally during the conversation, to which the Candidate has agreed prior to the event”.

### Asking dialogue-inviting questions

The art of asking questions is a key competence area in public defences. Opponent needs the competence to understand what kind of questions generate dialogue and engagement and how to formulate relevant questions. A competent Opponent asks only one question at a time—follow-up questions are better than multi-part questions. However, if Opponent feels compelled to ask a two-parter question, they can frame it by saying: “I now have two related questions for the Candidate about the data gathering. [Pause] First, I would like to ask how difficult it was to [- -]? And second, how did the Candidate overcome [- -]?” Opponent has to understand how various types of questions shape Candidate’s responses. Maintaining a focus on central issues and avoiding excessive details is important. A competent and constructive Opponent also strategically times both easier and harder questions during the examination.

In addition to asking questions that move the conversation forward in a goal-oriented way, Opponent does well to listen carefully to Candidate and ask relevant follow-up questions, rather than changing the subject and asking a new question. Opponent can listen actively when they are thoroughly prepared and possess an extensive understanding of their notes and questions. Furthermore, engaging in a conversation requires Opponent to skilfully navigate between advancing the conversation in a structured manner while also flexibly adjusting their communication to suit the situation. Min-

imising interruptions allows Candidate to defend their dissertation fully. Opponent prepares their questions beforehand, but social interaction cannot be scripted in advance.

The aim of the first questions in a public defence is to provide background and “warm up” the conversation. In practice, the questions might be as follows: “How and why did the Candidate choose this particular research topic?” or “What in particular does the Candidate’s research discipline bring to the examination of this topic?” or “How would the Candidate describe the decision-making process behind the title of this work?”

The aim of the final questions is to bring the conversation to a close. Often the last question is a little lighter and relates to, for example, Candidate’s future plans. The purpose is to let Candidate shine at the end. Possible options for the final question are:

If the Candidate possessed a magic wand and could make something happen right now in the world based on the knowledge gained in the dissertation, what would their wish be?

If the Candidate were promoted to CEO of a leading organisation in the field of X, which direction would they lead the company based on these findings?

The time has come for the final question, which is: Is there a question the Candidate would have liked to answer and was prepared for, but the Opponent did not pose today? Please: Ask yourself the question and gift us with the answer.

Finally, Opponent can say, for example, “We have now covered all the questions that I wanted for us to discuss today, and I am ready to give my closing statement”.

## Engaging the listeners

The public defence is public for a reason. In other words, it also needs to serve the listeners. Opponent does well in understanding the heterogeneity of the listeners. Not everyone is familiar with the research, and many are yet to read the dissertation. For some, it is their first time attending a public defence or any academic event, and they are uncertain how the event proceeds.

A communicatively competent Opponent acknowledges the listeners and uses metatalk through the event. Metatalk—talk about the way the conversation is had—might include, for example, the introductions and transitions to the discussion points. For instance, when Opponent addresses the ethical concerns of the study, they can use metatalk to explain to the listeners why having a conversation about ethics is important. This serves a pedagogical function in the event and will also allow Candidate to have time to structure their thoughts on ethics, which again, will serve the listeners. To fulfil its purpose, the event must also be sound checked: The listeners present and online need to hear all communication during the event.

As an example of the words Opponent can use, they may consider addressing the listeners at the beginning as follows:

For those listeners who are attending a public defence for the first time, let me provide an overview of the conversation between the Candidate and I in the next few hours. We will begin with [- -], followed by [- -]. Afterward, we will delve into [- -] and [- -]. Lastly, we will engage in a discussion regarding [- -].

Opponent may also choose to position themselves:

To clarify, my role as the Opponent is to lead the discussion by asking questions about the research presented in the dissertation. This allows the Candidate to publicly present their skills and defend the choices in their dissertation. I will highlight the strengths of the work while also addressing areas that may raise critical questions and require further exploration.

During the conversation, it is effective to reference the listeners and verbally acknowledge their presence. This furthers their interest and motivation to listen and establishes their important role in taking part in the event and as beneficiaries of research knowledge. For example, Opponent can ask Candidate to lay the ground for the listeners for more detailed discussion on a topic by prompting them: “I would now invite the Candidate to briefly share with the listeners why ethical review boards exist in academia, and why it was important for the Candidate to consider such matters in their research work”.

## Managing time

Typically, the duration of the public defence ranges from two to three hours. From the overall duration, the conversation between Opponent and Candidate takes approximately two-thirds. A public defence that is too short might be disappointing for Candidate and the listeners. The years-long process culminates in the event, and for most researchers, it is a significant and rare opportunity to discuss their research in depth in front of listeners and with another expert.

Opponent must plan and lead the conversation so that time is allocated reasonably to all sections of the dissertation. It is most appropriate to proceed by main chapter, by article, or by stages of the research process—not page

by page. Many times, the following topics are discussed in the order presented: (1) research backgrounds and topic selection, (2) theoretical background and key concepts, (3) research goal and questions, and how the topic was narrowed, (4) the research paradigm and/or research methodology, and research process in practice, including data collection and analysis, (5) research findings and conclusions, (6) research evaluation and ethical considerations, (7) scientific relevance and social impact, utilisation and application of research results, and (8) further research directions. However, there are other options, and Opponent can decide to construct the conversation in a different order.

In the end, the division of time is all about mathematics! For example, approximately two hours of conversation may include four 30-minute slots—or six 20-minute slots (see Table 2). If

Opponent aims at dividing the two-hour conversation into four 30-minute sections, they can discuss about six questions in each section for the duration of five minutes. The sections may be, for example, (1) the main body of the dissertation and (2–4) the Candidate's three research papers that contribute to it, or questions related to (1) background and concepts, (2) aim and methodology, (3) findings and conclusions, (4) evaluation, implications of results, and directions for future research. Thus, Opponent can prepare six questions for each section. However, since social interaction cannot be fully planned in advance, it is important to remain flexible if Candidate's answers are considerably longer or shorter than Opponent expected.

When planning, it may be helpful to distinguish between key questions/themes (these need to be discussed) and bonus questions (these can

**Table 2. An Example of the Time Management in a Public Defence**

Opening of the public defence: Opening words by Custos Lectio by Candidate (max. 20 minutes)	12.15–12.40 (25 minutes)
Opponent's turn begins: Opening statement, orientation to the discussion	12.40–12.45 (5 minutes)
Background and concepts of the dissertation	12.45–13.15 (30 minutes)
Aim and methodology of the dissertation	13.15–13.45 (30 minutes)
Findings and conclusions	13.45–14.15 (30 minutes)
Evaluation, implications of results, and directions for future research	14.15–14.30 (15 minutes)
Closing of the public defence: Opponent's closing statement	14.30–14.35 (5 minutes)
Candidate offers the listeners an opportunity to ask questions, which the Custos chairs Custos closes the event Candidate invites all participants for refreshments	14.35–14.45 (10 minutes)

be discussed if there is time). It is wise to set time aside for any follow-up questions that become relevant. Avoid getting carried away and spending more time than planned, for example, on the first slot. When there are two Opponents, the division of time and responsibilities, and commitment to the planned schedule is particularly important.

Summaries of the guidelines for building interaction with Candidate, asking dialogue-inviting questions, engaging the listeners, and managing time are presented in Table 3.

### **Conclusions: Good luck and have a memorable event!**

We outlined the communicative role of the Opponent in public defences of doctoral dissertations to support those granted the honour. Conscientious preparation contributes to conducting Opponent's role competently. Since the Candidate's doctoral research process culminates in the public defence, it is a highly significant event in their research career and academia in general. The public defence symbolically and in actuality transitions the Candidate to an acknowledged member of the academia. Since most academics complete only one doctorate in their lifetime, the conversation at the public defence is meaningful and memorable, and raises excitement and anxiety.

As a communicatively unique interaction situation, public defence deserves more research attention. There is a definite need for guidance, communication training, and support for Candidates, Opponents, and Custodes. All parties affect how well the goals of the event are met. The importance of public defence is too great to be advised only by anecdotal experiences, for example, on social media (Wisker et al., 2022).

Universities benefit from training Candidates, Opponents, and Custodes for their roles in public defences. The guidance and training add to their competence and consequently, increase insightful public defences. Most of all, developing the interpersonal communication competence that benefits both Candidates and Opponents in public defences will significantly improve the quality of valuable academic debates, which promote the visibility and impact of research.

The Opponent's task is a great academic honour and expression of trust in their expertise. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that the public defence is first and foremost a celebration of the Candidate's research work, achievements, expertise, and research contribution. A competent Opponent balances the critical and evaluative tone with acknowledgement of merits and effort, and promotes a constructive conversation that allows the Candidate to shine.

**Table 3. Guidelines on Social Interaction in Public Defences**

<b>Building interaction with Candidate</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use both verbal and nonverbal communication to connect, converse, and support Candidate.</li> <li>• Accomplish both the task- and relationship-oriented objectives of the interaction.</li> <li>• Present your questions and feedback in a clear and organised manner. Articulate your points effectively without causing confusion or unnecessary tension.</li> <li>• Be mindful and respectful, and make Candidate feel at ease. Provide encouraging feedback periodically.</li> <li>• Express any disagreement or criticism in a constructive, non-confrontational manner, fostering a positive academic environment.</li> </ul>
<b>Asking dialogue-inviting questions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask only one question at a time. Do not get stuck on a question that Candidate is unable to answer or has already answered.</li> <li>• Recognise the distinctions between different types of questions (e.g., open questions, yes-or-no questions, and other response-driven questions), as they each yield different types of answers.</li> <li>• Prompt conversation that centres on the relevance of the research and the bigger picture. Avoid trivial matters or promoting your own personal achievements.</li> <li>• Consider placing ‘easier questions’ to the beginning and end of the public defence. Also, do not hesitate to ask ‘harder questions’.</li> <li>• Listen and take note of what Candidate has already said. The purpose is to have a conversation, not an interview. You can, for example, reference what Candidate said to transition into the next question to communicate your listening.</li> <li>• Ask follow-up questions and clarifications.</li> <li>• Do not interrupt (unless there is a compelling need). Opponent must give Candidate time to reply so that they can defend their dissertation.</li> <li>• When necessary, give background information and lead Candidate—and the listeners—to the question. However, do not engage in meandering or overly long monologues.</li> </ul>
<b>Engaging the listeners</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A public defence is an important window into the work of the university. The public defence serves a pedagogical function as well, and an informed layperson should be able to follow the conversation.</li> <li>• Remember the importance of metatalk throughout the event (e.g., if you refer to a specific figure, please indicate the page number where the figure can be found).</li> <li>• Make sure the listeners can hear all the questions and answers during the event.</li> </ul>
<b>Managing time</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Typically, the public defence lasts two to three hours. Remember that too short a public defence might be disappointing for Candidate.</li> <li>• Plan and lead the conversation so that time is allocated reasonably to all sections of the dissertation.</li> <li>• When planning, make a distinction between key questions/themes and bonus questions.</li> <li>• Remain adaptable and flexible: Interaction cannot be fully planned in advance.</li> </ul>

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OTSIKKO JA ASIASANAT SUOMEKSI:

**Tukea vastaväittäjille vuorovaikutuksen vahvistamiseen väitöstilaisuudessa**

ASIASANAT: vastaväittäjä, viestintä, vuorovaikutus, väitös, väitöstilaisuus