

Quality assurance and the binomial professionalism–personality for selecting external examiners for the doctorate

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euacde COUNCIL
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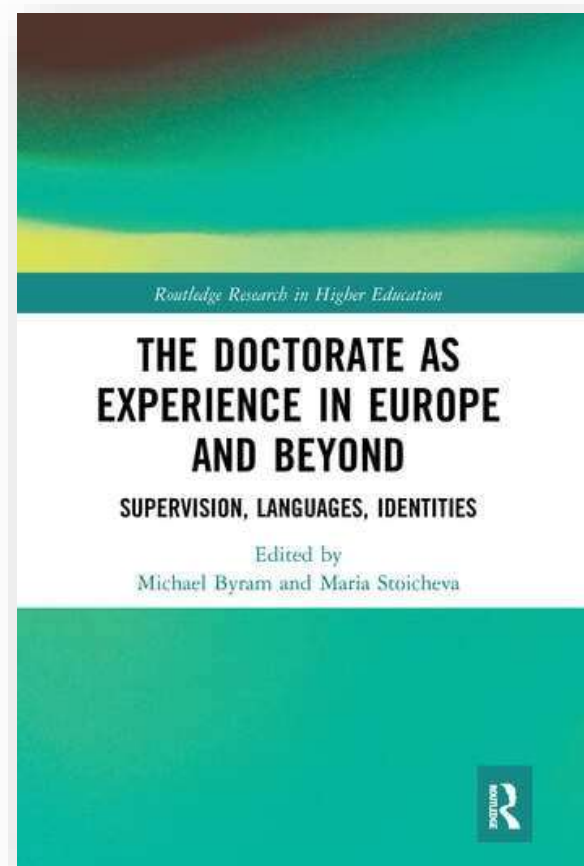
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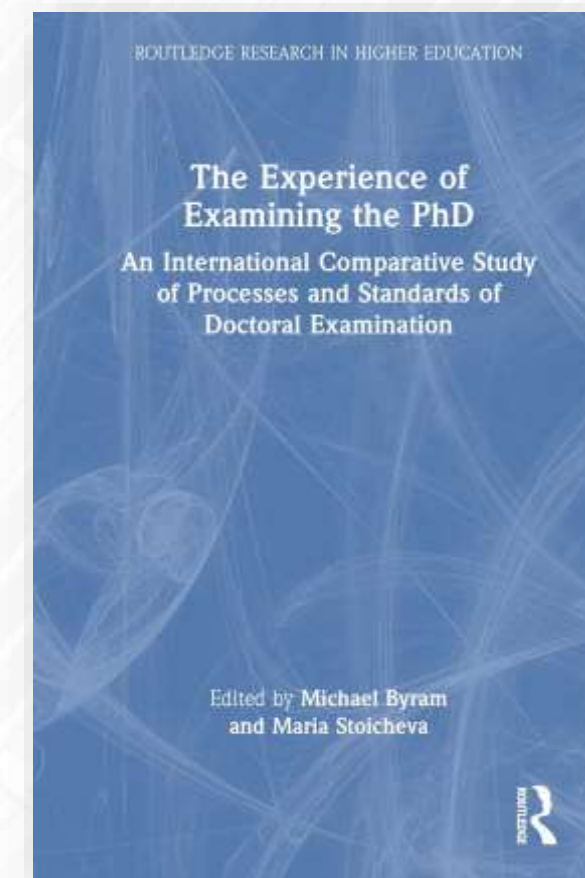


A BRIEF STORY...

2020



2023



2024

The Experience of 'Defending' the Doctoral Dissertation

2024
Diana Oliveira
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euacde

THE EXPERIENCE OF 'DEFENDING' THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

An international comparative study of the final oral examination

AIM: To describe and analyse the defence **as it is experienced** by candidates and examiners.

Some notes on methodology

- ✓ Case studies (n=11)
- ✓ Ethnographic (Agar, 1980; Spradley, 1979)
- ✓ **Observation of 'what is actually taking place in the viva'** (Dobson, 2018, p. 23)
- ✓ Comparative analysis
- ✓ Stimulate reflection on comparability and equivalence

- ✗ Representative of the countries
 - ✗ Representative of all the disciplines in the universities
 - ✗ Generalizable
- The Experience of 'Defending' the Doctoral Dissertation

THE EXPERIENCE OF 'DEFENDING' THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Convenience & opportunity sample
11
(Cohen et al., 2018; Emmel, 2013)



OUR FOCUS TODAY



University of Aveiro
PORTUGAL

Beijing Language and Culture University
CHINA

OUR FOCUS TODAY



universidade
de aveiro



SELECTION CRITERIA

- Juxtapose an European case with a non-European
- Particularly interesting complexity of factors
 - ✓ strikingly different educational traditions and modes of PhD defence
 - ✓ different criteria for the composition of examination committees)

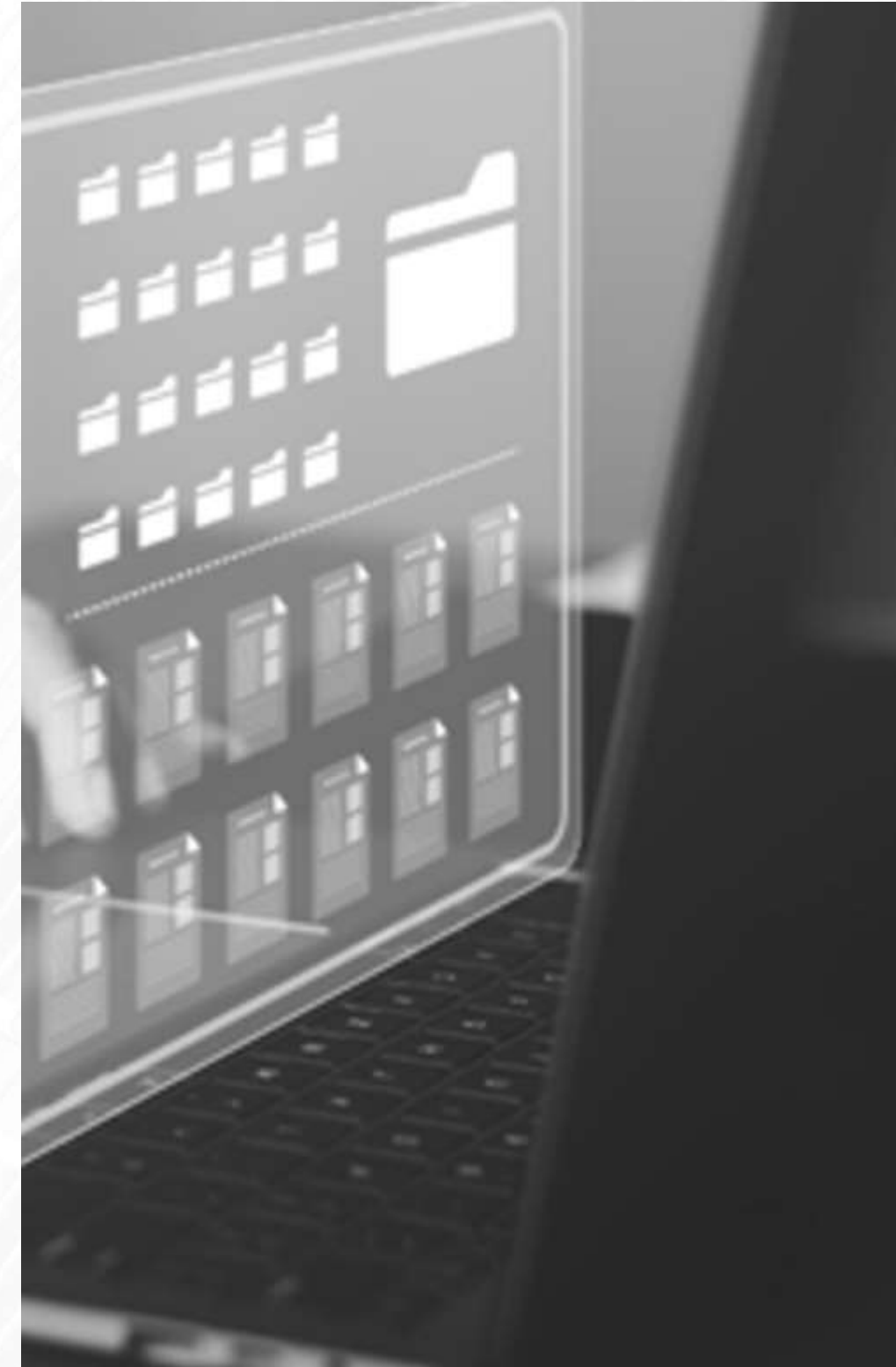
AIM

Stimulate reflection on comparability and equivalence, by considering **one** of the many dimensions of the defence which we will analyse in the project: **the composition of the examining group and relationships among participants**

DATA COLLECTION

Our data are entirely qualitative

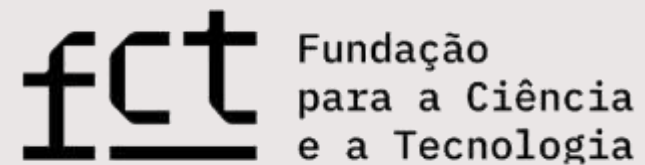
1. University regulations
2. Semi-structured online interviews
 - before and after a defence
 - candidates, supervisors and examiners
3. Field notes from observation of the defences



ABOUT THIS WORK

Funding

This study was supported by the: the European Union-NextGenerationEU, through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria, project No BG-RRP-2.004-0008 [Byram]; and by National Funds through FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., under the project UIDB/00194/2020 (<https://doi.org/10.54499/UIDB/00194/2020>) [Oliveira].



Ethical approval

Ethical approval (No. 93-M-109/21.04.2023) was given by the Ethics Committee of the University of Sofia (Bulgaria) and complemented by the approval from the Data Protection Officer in the University of Aveiro.

2005 EUA RECOMMENDATIONS

Emphasise the need to underpin diversity in doctoral programmes with 'quality and sound practice' (EUA, 2010, p. 3).



ASSUMPTION

The use of External Examiners (EE) ↔ includes attention to the question of quality assurance

But how are they selected?



The maps are out of proportion

Bes et al. (2019)

FRANCE

The 'forge of peers':

The committees are composed from a relatively identified stock of interpersonal relationships already consolidated by co-publications.

Joyner (2013)

UK

How EE are chosen:

Two main characteristics that should be required of any potential EE:

1. 'be aware of the intellectual frontiers of their subject'; and
2. 'be mature adults, of enough humanity to ensure that the examination process is a worthwhile and developmental experience for the candidate' (p. 123).

Kiley (2009)

Australia

Interviews with experienced supervisors also revealed both dimensions:

1. professional / academic considerations, and
2. personality issues

Şenel et al.(2020)

Turkey

Supervisors who had supervised ≥ 4 postgraduate students (n=91):

Strong tendency to repeatedly choose the same examiners.



Professional considerations

Can be achieved through institutional examination regulations and scrutiny (Joyner, 2003).

Personality issues

Depends on supervisors (Joyner, 2003):

- who 'have a duty to prepare and inform themselves well in advance of the selection of EE' (p. 125);
- If an examiner has the reputation of being 'less than humane (...) perhaps you should look elsewhere' (p. 126).

Supervisors' 'strong sense of protection' (Kiley (2009, p. 889):

- 'Avoiding throwing a candidate to the "wolves"' (p. 901);
- Protecting 'doctoral students from the "bad and mad", and looking for those examiners who have empathy and understanding, while at the same time maintaining high standards and integrity' (p. 889).





However...

if the selection of EE takes into account the **type of candidate and thesis**, and the recognition that it is important **'to match the examiner to the student'** (Joyner 2003, 126)

...then

leads to a different approach: 'selecting examiners **for the outstanding** candidate and dissertation and selecting examiners **for "the rest"**' (Kiley 2009, 892).



Selecting EE for the outstanding

- A key international expert → helps to ensure their future, or promotes future research collaborations.
- Criteria:
 - topic/methodology fit
 - understanding of the system within which the dissertation has been developed;
 - recent experience within the academy
 - experience in doctoral examination
 - availability

(Kiley 2009)



Selecting EE for “the rest”

- Criteria:
 - high standards
 - Fairness
 - intellectual courtesy and generosity
 - reliability

(Kiley 2009)

THE REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS

One principle that underlies the successful selection of EE is that institutions should have carefully constructed regulations defining the qualifications and experience expected of that examiner.

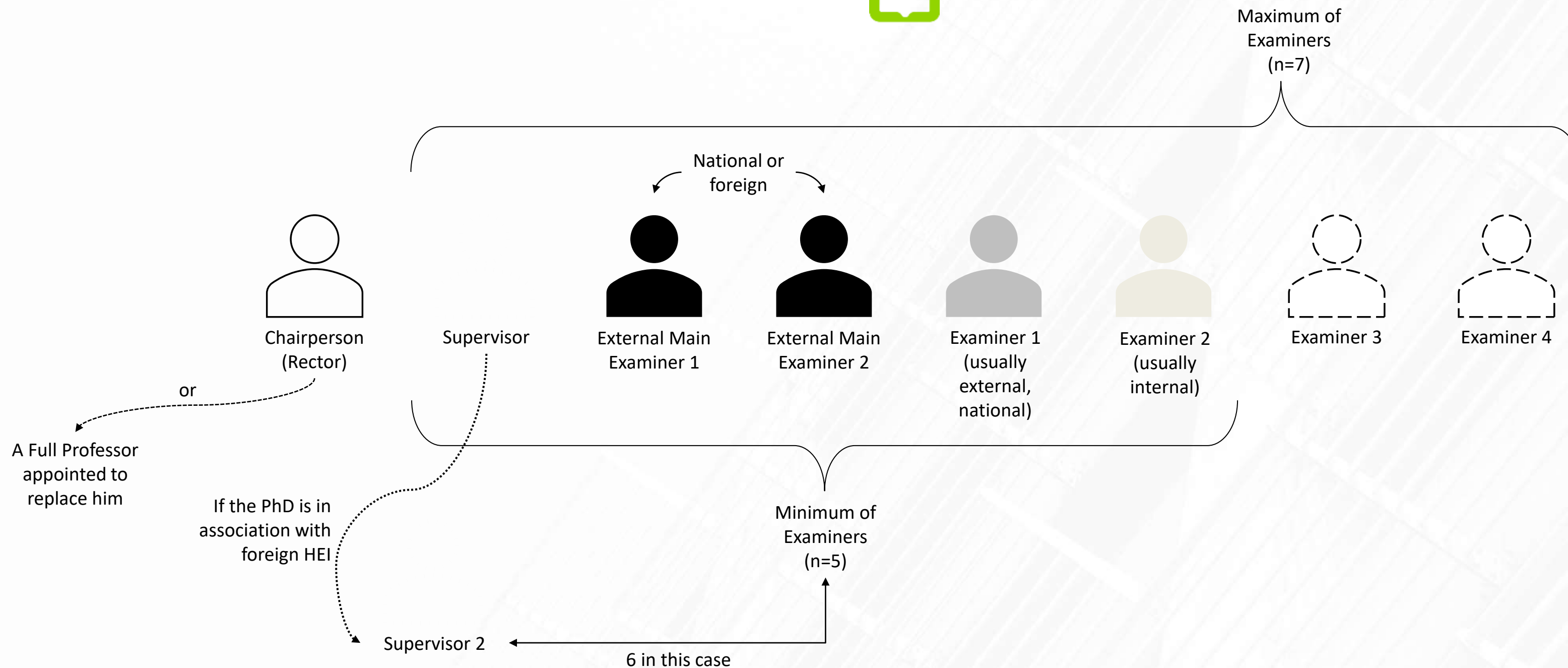
(Joyner, 2003)

OUR CASES

The regulations of the two universities refer to the qualifications and experience of examiners, albeit in a generic way.

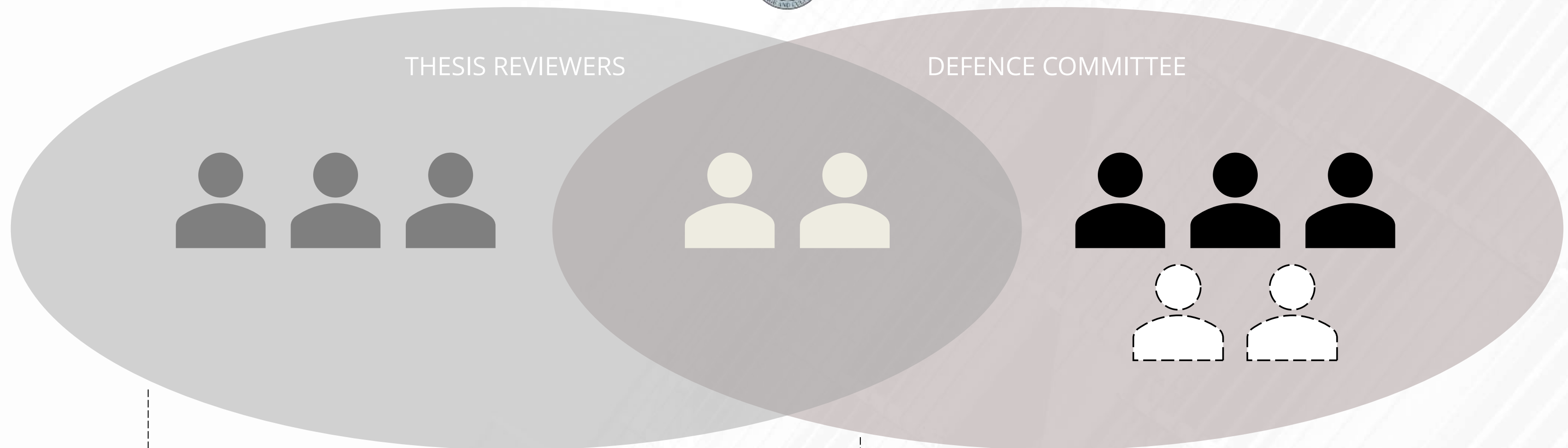
THE REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS

Examining group composition
University of Aveiro (Portugal)



THE REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS

Examining group composition
Beijing Language and Culture University (China)



- Familiar with the field of study
- Professors from HEIs or research institutes
- At least two external
- Their name are kept from the candidate
- The supervisor/s shall not serve as reviewer/es

- Professors in the field of study
- No less than two external professors
- No less than two 'doctoral supervisors'
- The chairman should be a doctoral professor
- Supervisor/s not included

EXAMINING GROUP

Composition



6 People

- ✓ Chairperson
- ✓ Supervisor
- ✓ 4 Examiners (3 EE, 1 international)
 - ✓ 2 Main examiners
 - ✓ 1 from a Portuguese HEI
 - ✓ 1 from a Spanish University
 - ✓ 2 Non-main examiners
 - ✓ 1 from the University of Aveiro
 - ✓ 1 from another Portuguese HEI

**All examiners were invited
by the supervisor.**



5 People (defence committee)

- ✓ Chairperson
- ✓ 4 Examiners (all EE and national)
- ✓ 3 Examiners were thesis reviewers, although the regulation states that only 2 can be on both committees

**All examiners were invited
by the supervisor.**



EXAMINING GROUP

Reasons why the examiners believed they had been invited
& the reasons why they accepted

- ✓ All of them referred to their interest and/or work developed around the theme of the thesis.
- ✓ In addition to the topic, the other reasons given can be grouped into three broad categories:
 1. 'Making a contribution' includes extrinsic motivations (altruism, academic spirit)
 2. 'Receiving a contribution' includes intrinsic motivations or benefits (scientific updating, professional development, impact on performance evaluation)
 3. 'Personal relationships' (professional and personal relationships established with the supervisor).

- ✓ Some of the reasons given by the supervisor for choosing three examiners from the thesis review committee to be part of the defence committee had to do with personal relationships
 - ✓ Relieving stress from the candidate since she knew them both
 - ✓ The supervisor also stated that she used her networks to help the student be successful.
- ✓ One examiner (the only one whose area of research was not so close to the topic) was invited mainly because of personal relationships with the supervisor: she and the supervisor were '*tongmen*', and they had collaborated many times before. This examiner was also on the thesis review committee.



EXAMINING GROUP

Reasons why the examiners believed they had been invited
& the reasons why they accepted

The only examiner whose area of research was not so close to the theme of the thesis, considered that she would not be 'the right person', but she was the 'choice on the part of the supervisor'.

(Internal Examiner, Aveiro)

The national examiner and the two main examiners mentioned the professional and trusting relationship they have with the supervisor as reasons for being invited and for accepting the invitation.

'As the supervisor, you want your student to pass the defence and acquire the doctoral degree successfully. So, of course you will do all you can, including using your own guanxi (network/connections) to help the student pass the defence'.

(Supervisor, BLCU)

'Instead of inviting the professors whom they are not familiar with, supervisors prefer to invite their old friends to ensure that everything is under their control, to make sure that the student can pass the oral defence'. (Examiner, BLCU)

The candidate knew three examiners (3/4).



The candidate knew three examiners (3/4).





SOME FINDINGS

The existence of trusting professional relationships between the supervisor and the examiners...

...influences the constitution of the examining committees.

Aveiro Supervisor's choice of all four examiners.

This echoes the findings of Bes, Lamy, and Maisonobe (2019).

BLCU Supervisor's choice of the examiners on the oral defence committee, to create a less stressful climate for the candidate.

The Supervisor looked for humanity to ensure that the examination process is a worthwhile and developmental experience for the candidate (Joyner, 2003).

Both supervisors (Aveiro & BLCU) played the role of protector (Kiley, 2009) and of trying to match the examiners with the Candidate (Joyner, 2003).

SOME FINDINGS

The existence of trusting professional relationships between the supervisor and the examiners...

...influences expectations about the thesis.

'I knew from the beginning that it was a high-quality thesis' (Foreign Main Examiner, Aveiro).

In BLCU, the (overlapped) examiner 2 and reviewer gave the thesis a high grade, which must have an influence on the perceptions of other examiners' assessing the thesis and the defence.



SOME FINDINGS

The existence of trusting professional relationships between the supervisor and the examiners...

...influences the way the thesis is read.

'I'm not very careful when I read it, because I know that the person who supervises guarantees a set of assumptions from the outset' (National Examiner, Aveiro).

In BLCU, as the grading of the thesis is not that objective, it must be influenced by the factors such as who send the invitation.

CONCLUSION

The function of 'unknown' examiners is more likely to be a matter of the judgemental dimension of the defence (authentication / certification / validation and 'candidate's capacity to defend the thesis').

The function of 'known' examiners is more likely to be connected to the 'formative' and the ceremonial 'rite of passage' dimension.

However...

...this is a simplification, tendencies and not generalisations.

...being **external** doesn't mean being '**unknown**'.

CONCLUSION

Our analysis reveals that the issue of quality assurance is affected by the potential tension in the professionalism–personality binomial.

If, on the one hand, quality is purportedly guaranteed through institutionally established criteria that define the selection of EEs, on the other hand, it can be influenced by the supervisor's relationships and/or the role supervisors sometimes play in protecting their students by trying to match their personalities with those of the EE.



Professional
considerations

Personality
issues

SELECTION OF EXTERNAL EXAMINERS (EE)

CONCLUSION

In the bigger picture of quality assurance, a limitation on the number of 'known' examiners and the number of times one such examiner may be invited by a supervisor, is also a matter for further research.

After the fieldwork finished, the Scientific Council of the University of Aveiro issued a **Deliberation on conflict of interests** in doctoral examining committees: from March 2024, all members (except the supervisor(s), have to fill in a Declaration in which they must identify conflicts of interest with the candidate and/or the supervisor(s).



Professional
considerations

Personality
issues

SELECTION OF EXTERNAL EXAMINERS (EE)

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THANK YOU

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