Guidelines for PhD Examiners

This document is intended to inform examiners about the general procedures for the examination of doctoral theses in the Department of Computer Science at ETH Zurich and about their role in these procedures. In particular, it describes the format of the thesis reports that examiners are required to submit before the examination and details of the examination itself.

1. Examination Committee

The examination committee consists of the supervisor of the thesis, one or more co-examiners and a full professor of the Department of Computer Science to chair the proceedings. Co-examiners who are not professors of ETH Zurich must be approved by the Department and for this a short CV must be submitted at the time of appointment. Note that it is typical to have 2-3 co-examiners.

2. Duties of Examiners

The thesis should be approved by all examiners before the examination. This means that examiners should have read the thesis and given feedback on any required or recommended changes before the examination and have approved the version of the thesis that is submitted by the student. Each examiner is required to write a report on the thesis which should be submitted at least one week before the examination. A copy of the thesis and all reports are made available to all professors within the department before the examination.

It is expected that examiners should be present at the examination either physically or remotely via video conferencing. Each examiner will be allocated time during the examination to ask questions and they should therefore have a set of prepared questions ready. These questions may be about specific details of the thesis or general questions about the research area.

3. Thesis Reports

The thesis reports should be 2-3 pages in length. The report should summarise the main contributions of the thesis and comment on the quality of the work in terms of the scientific content and also the presentation. Since it is normal practice that a thesis is only submitted once all examiners have approved it, the report should conclude with a statement from the examiner
recommending its acceptance as submitted for a doctoral degree. Note that minor revisions can be made to the thesis after the examination when the students have to prepare a bound final version for publication.

An outstanding thesis may be proposed by the department for the award of an ETH medal. The reports of the examiners will be an important factor in deciding on recommendations. If an examiner considers a thesis to be outstanding in terms of both scientific contribution and presentation, they may therefore wish to add an additional statement recommending that it be considered for an award. Note that a maximum of 8% of doctoral theses can be awarded a medal.

The report should clearly show the title of the thesis and the name of the doctoral student in the heading. The report should be dated and signed. If a report is submitted electronically, the examiner will be asked to sign a copy of the report at the examination.

4. Examination Procedure

The date and time of the examination will be agreed in advance by all members of the examination committee and announced to all members of the department. The chair of the examination committee, the supervisor, at least one of the co-examiners and the student must all be physically present at the examination. It is possible that other co-examiners may participate remotely using video conferencing services.

The examination consists of a presentation of the thesis by the student followed by a discussion session during which examiners can ask questions of the student. In the Department of Computer Science, it is normal that the presentation lasts 30 minutes and the discussion session is also around 30 minutes. However, the discussion session may extend beyond 30 minutes if the examination committee consists of more than 3 examiners to ensure that each examiner has sufficient time for their questions. Also, there are cases where the presentation may be longer if this has been agreed in advance by the examination committee.

Note that other members of the department and guests may attend the examination as observers. It is usual for example that the other members of the student’s research group or institute attend.

The examination committee meets directly after the examination to agree on the outcome and whether the committee would support the recommendation of the thesis for an ETH Zurich medal. The outcome of the examination is a pass/fail based solely on the student’s performance in the examination.

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