Some guidelines for opposition

**Free and open discussion.** Opposition as an academic phenomenon is an old tradition. The main idea is to promote a free and open discussion of a scientific piece of work. Acting as Opponent at a final thesis work seminar is also an important part in the thesis work course in regional planning. The objective is to develop the Student's ability of critical analysis of scientific work and presentation of this critique. Whereas opposition involves scrutiny of all aspects of the thesis, it is not feasible to discuss them all exhaustively during the public Final Seminar. The Opponent may, therefore, after explaining the reason, focus more on particular aspects rather than others. She/he must have read the thesis in its entirety to be able to give it the required critique.

A good seminar culture is characterised by constructive criticism. The Opponent shall, therefore, seek to make her/his discussion into a creative exchange of views. Arguments should be reasoned, and recognise that choices in the regional planning field often involves interpersonal value judgements - there is seldom an issue of absolute truth. Inarguably, however, the thesis needs to follow the scientific requirements of the research environment in which it is judged, ie at the Unit of Urban Planning, as part of the tradition at the Division of Urban Studies. Identified deficiencies in thesis organisation and content regarding these requirements – as provided for in the IMRAD approach (2.11 Scientific writing; Box 2.10 – IMRAD-style contents organisation of a thesis at the Unit of Urban Planning) - should be discussed and accompanied with suggestions for improvements. To assist the Student who opposes the defending Student's thesis at a public Final Seminar, several points are elaborated for guidance below.

**Organisation of opposition.** The Opponent starts with a presentation of the items that she/he will deal with during the opposition.

**Organisation of the thesis.** The way the thesis is organised is of vital importance for the ability of the reader to assimilate it. The Opponent should, therefore, begin opposition proper by providing an account of how the Student has chosen to organise the thesis and how problem, aim, objectives, delimitation, theoretical framework, methodological approach, results and discussion are dealt with. The account and/or ensuing discussion, should provide a critique on how the material is used and presented, and also if it enables the analysis and conclusions that are presented (2.11 Scientific writing; Box 2.10 – IMRAD-style contents organisation of a thesis at the Unit of Urban Planning).

**Chosen field, area and research problem.** The Opponent may then - during her/his time for discussion with questions and comments - assert how the research problem fits the regional planning interest field. Is there reference to a general problem field and a more specific problem area? Do the focused research problem and its researchable questions emanate from the specific problem area? Are the researchable questions really researchable? Is there a declared delimitation, and has it been adhered to? Considering the research problem at hand, are there alternative ways to organise the thesis for the sake of clarity?

**Relation to theory and means for analysis.** To afford an understanding of reality, science seeks to structure our perception of it in theory. This is why scientific work tends to be set in a theoretical framework of different levels of ambition. Analysis, more often than not, makes use of established theories or theories in an evolutionary phase. The task for the Opponent is to discuss how the thesis writing Student presents her/his chosen theory or theories for analysis in her/his thesis. Are concepts and criteria clearly defined and related to the research problem? Has the Student made complements or changes to theory to construct her/his own theoretical framework to fit the specific needs of the research problem? An important criterion in appraising
the relevance and value of a theoretical framework is to assess whether it connects with the research problem and its possible resolution? Would an alternative theoretical approach to underpin the ensuing methodological approach and its analysis have been more rewarding in bringing light upon the issue at focus in the present study?

**Methodological approach.** Theses are often based on a descriptive approach. The author may also wish to add an explanatory component to the description. In the regional planning field, a normative/prescriptive component is frequently also added. The choice of method for analysis of the material has to be directed by the need to describe, explain and/or to be normative/prescriptive. The first step for the Opponent in discussing methodological approach is to examine whether the thesis writing Student has chosen a workable method for answering the questions of the research problem.

In theses within the regional planning discipline qualitative methods tend to be the predominant choice, but quantitative methods may often complement. Independently of the choice of method in the thesis under scrutiny, there are two useful criteria that the Opponent may use in her/his assessment of its applicability. The first concerns the validity of the method and/or its technique(s), ie if the method and/or its technique(s) are focusing on what is intended. The second criterion concerns reliability, ie if the measuring is done correctly. Another methodological issue that the Opponent shall deal with - if the study is done as a case or multiple case study - is about selection of case or cases. The thesis writing Student’s personal interests or values should not jeopardise objectivity in selection, collection and analysis of data. Is sampling representative? If not, is it still relevant and valid and reliable within presented and well argued constraints?

Analysis concerns the processing of material or information/data. Depending on the chosen problem and researchable questions for the thesis, there are considerable variations in what may be used for processing. The most common form of research material in the regional planning field is existing research front literature or otherwise documented information/data. Interviews conducted by the Student are also common. The Opponent may ask questions and/or comment on whether the material is comprehensive, authentic and relevant in relation to aim and objectives of the chosen study.

**Discussion.** Concluding her/his discussion of the thesis, the Opponent should now elaborate on how the results/findings relate to: problem formulation; aim and objectives; theoretical framework, methodological approach; and, discussion with possible way forward. Do the results verify that the problem is a problem? Do they appear to be the outcome of reliable and valid method(s) and technique(s) inherent in a relevant methodological approach? What points have been settled, which remain unsettled? What is the scientific and practical significance of the thesis? Do the results indicate that issues that were assumed away in the delimitation are relevant in relation to the chosen research problem and need further elaboration in a future study? Does the research problem itself warrant further study?