Guidelines for examining committee composition and conflict of interest situations

This document clarifies how the Research Programmes Board regards the composition of examining committees and potential conflict of interest situations.

The principal supervisor together with the department’s director of third-cycle studies submits a proposal for an external reviewer and examining committee in view of a public defence of a doctoral thesis. The proposal is reviewed by group of directors of third-cycle studies and a head of third-cycle studies ultimately decides on the composition.

Examining committee and external reviewer:

The examining committee is to be composed of three member and (at least) one substitute. Five members are permitted but should only be used in special cases. It is a condition that the members have sufficient expertise in order to determine the quality of a thesis and its public defence. Even though an individual member may not be able to command all parts of the thesis in the smallest detail, the examining committee collectively should be able to judge the thesis as a whole.

The external reviewer

- shall have a PhD or equivalent
- is not to be working at the faculty or department concerned, unless there is a special reason.

The examining committee

- At least one member shall participate who is not working at Lund University
- At least one substitute is to be appointed
- Supervisors are not to be members of the examining committee
- There is to be no conflict of interest (between one of the supervisors /author of the thesis and members/external reviewer). Problems relating to conflicts of interest are covered under the heading Conflict of interest (COI) situations
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Even if a member or substitute drops out, the examining committee is to fulfil the requirements listed above.

In addition, the Faculty of Engineering’s guidelines state a number of points that should be fulfilled:

- Members of both genders should participate
- At least one member, as far as it is possible, should be of the same gender as the author of the thesis
- There should be at least one member from another higher education institution. Here we welcome attempts to include international representation regarding examining committees/external reviewers, as LTH’s third-cycle studies are to be of a high international standard (LTH’s strategic plan). For certain individual subjects, however, it is natural to recruit nationally.
  - At least two members should have qualifications required for appointment as an associated professor, or equivalent. For Swedish members, the requirement is that you are an associate professor/professor. Having “equivalent” qualifications is mainly applicable to members from abroad. In this case the requirements are for the qualifications an associate professor is expected to have, such as considerable academic production after the doctoral thesis and certain experience of supervision. A member from industry who has long experience of working life is not considered to have equivalent associate professor qualifications if equivalent academic qualifications are lacking.

These “should” conditions are expected to be fulfilled by regular members. However, if a substitute is required to stand in, there is no requirement that the “should” conditions are fulfilled.

If it is found that prior to the registration of a public defence of a thesis that one of the points above cannot be observed, the responsible head of third-cycle studies and the department’s director of third-cycle studies are to be contacted for a discussion. The exception is the point concerning representation of both genders, as it is sufficient to state in the registration why it has not been possible.

Conflict of interest (COI) situations:

An absolute requirement for public defences is that there is to be no conflict of interest between supervisors/author of the thesis and members/external reviewer. It can often be difficult to determine where the boundary is for conflict of interest. We offer some guidance on this below. The guidelines are based on the Swedish Research Council’s rules on conflict of interest as well as discussions among LTH’s directors of third-cycle studies (Workshop 2017).

The provisions regarding conflict of interest are in the Administrative Procedure Act (1986:223), which is a general law for all public authorities. It describes various forms of conflict of interest.

In general the following applies:

- anyone who knows of any circumstance that could constitute his/her disqualification because of conflict of interest is obliged to disclose it on his/her own initiative.
It is therefore important in the registration of the public defence to state all circumstances that are relevant, even if you yourself see no conflict of interest.

One type of conflict of interest that often arises is COI due to special circumstances, i.e. if there is a particular circumstance that can undermine confidence in the person’s impartiality in the matter.

Examples may include

- close cooperation in a professional capacity.
- clear friendship or antagonism.
- relationship of dependency of a financial nature.
- boss/employee relationship.
- someone being engaged in the matter to such an extent that it is easy to suspect that it may affect an impartial assessment.

Circumstances must in the main be judged on a case-by-case basis and it is difficult to establish general rules. To make things easier, we have provided some examples of situations below, classified according to COI, RISK OF COI, NO COI. If there is a risk of conflict of interest, the principal supervisor is to contact the department’s director of third-cycle studies and the head of third-cycle studies for a discussion prior to a registration being made (and appropriately also before members/external reviewer are contacted). If the relevant circumstance is not considered to be a conflict of interest, it is nonetheless to be mentioned in the registration. The concept of conflict of interest applies equally to principal supervisors and assistant supervisors.

**Relationship of dependency**

- The supervisor has participated, or will participate, in an assessment of the external reviewer’s/member’s doctoral student. **NO COI and in normal cases does not need to be documented.**
- The proposed member/external reviewer has previously been/is active (e.g. as postdoc/lecturer) at the doctoral student’s/supervisor’s department/division (in close cooperation with a supervisor), or vice versa. **NO COI if it was a long time ago (>10 years). RISK OF COI if it was more recent, COI if it applies now.**
- The proposed member/external reviewer has had one of the supervisors as their own supervisor during third-cycle studies. **COI regardless of how long ago it transpired.**
- The supervisor has been responsible for inviting the member/external reviewer to hold a speech at a large conference. **NO COI**
- The supervisor is a member of a working committee/assessor on a research council to which the member/external reviewer could be expected to submit an application, or has already been in this position and awarded a considerable grant to the member/external reviewer. **RISK OF COI (In this case the member/external reviewer must declare the situation themselves.)**
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- Expert statement in recent years (<3–5 years; e.g. regarding associate professor qualifications or appointment/promotion) written by the supervisor. **RISK OF COI**

- Expert statement regarding ongoing matters (e.g. regarding associate professor qualifications or appointment/promotion) written by the supervisor. **COI**

**Research collaboration**

- There has been a co-publication involving the proposed member/external reviewer and the supervisor during the previous 5, 10 or 20 years. **If there has been research collaboration that resulted in co-publication during the previous 5 years, this is considered as COI. For collaboration and co-publication in the period 5–10 years ago there is a RISK OF COI and it must be judged on the basis of the scope of the collaboration. In general, collaborations more than 10 years ago are considered as NO COI. One exception could be intensive collaboration that is perhaps connected to personal friendship.**

- There has been co-publication between the proposed member/external reviewer and the supervisor recently in the form of “position papers” with multiple co-authors. **NO COI. If co-publication is not the result of direct research collaboration, such co-publication can be allowed even if it is recent (e.g. in the form of position papers, surveys or project reports).**

**Relationship of dependency of a financial nature**

- The proposed member/external reviewer and supervisor have applied for (in the previous 5 years) joint funding (granted or not granted) or have planned to apply jointly for funding. **If there has been joint awarded funding in which both parties together are a considerable element of the project, this is considered as COI. If there has been a recent unsuccessful application, or a planned/submitted proposal, this is RISK OF COI.**

- The proposed member/external reviewer and supervisor participate in a joint externally-financed project with a limited number of partners. **Working in joint projects is considered as COI.**

- The proposed member/external reviewer and supervisor both participate in a large externally-financed project with a large number of partners, e.g. EU network projects. **To participate in a joint project is NO COI if there is no direct research collaboration and there are no direct financial connections (such as one of them controlling the project).**

- The proposed examining committee member/external reviewer and supervisor have previously been awarded a large joint grant. **A completed project during the previous 5 years is considered as COI, thereafter RISK OF COI and after more than 10 years it is NO COI.**

- The proposed member/external reviewer belong to the same department, but different divisions. **At a large department with financially independent divisions this is NO COI. At other departments there is a RISK OF COI. If joint finances are involved, it is always COI.**

- The proposed member/external reviewer is employed at a company that owns the rights to the research results in the thesis or has funded the research. **Considered as COI.**
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- The member/external reviewer works at a company where the supervisor has a role as co-owner, board member, etc. Considered as COI.

These guidelines were approved by the LTH Research Programmes Board at a meeting on 13 February 2018.