

# Guidelines for Best Practice in Thesis Examination

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These guidelines are for Supervisors involved in the thesis examination process for higher degrees by research and contain information taken directly from the Conflict of Interest Guidelines prepared by the Australian Council of Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies (<http://www.ddogs.edu.au/>).

The thesis examination process relies on examiners to assess a thesis through a clearly articulated set of criteria. The process assumes that examiners take on the task independently and without bias. Professional/personal relationships between examiners and candidates/supervisors/university have the potential to introduce bias and represent a perceived or actual conflict of interest.

In managing conflicts of interest, it is essential to maintain a sense of proportion. The aim of the Guidelines is to ensure the integrity of the examination process and protect the reputation of supervisors, students, examiners and Curtin University degrees. The Guidelines do not assume that any individuals at the University are likely to behave inappropriately.

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## 1.0 Rules

1.1 Extract from section 12, Thesis Examining Panel, of Rule 10: Degree of Doctor by Research:

- (a) *The Faculty Graduate Studies Committee shall, on the recommendation of the Head of Enrolling Area, appoint a Thesis Examining Panel, comprising:*
    - (i) *the Chairperson of the Thesis Committee (ex officio) acting as Chairperson; and*
    - (ii) *two Examiners both of whom shall be external to the University.*
  - (b) *No person who is or has at any time been a member of a candidate's Interim Thesis Committee or Thesis Committee shall be eligible for appointment as an Examiner.*
  - (c) *In recommending a Thesis Examining Panel, the Head of Enrolling Area shall take all reasonable steps to ensure that Examiners are free from bias with respect to the candidate, the Supervisor or the University, and shall preserve the integrity and independence of the examination process.*
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## 2.0 Conflicts of Interest

Listed below are examples of different types of conflict of interest that may arise between the examiner and various parties including the candidate, the supervisor/advisor, the University, the subject matter itself and another examiner. The list is indicative and is not to be considered exhaustive.

### A. Conflict with the Candidate

#### *Working relationship*

- |     |   |       |
|-----|---|-------|
| A1. | Examiner has co-authored a paper with the candidate within the last five years                                      | MAJOR |
| A2. | Examiner has worked with the candidate on matters regarding the thesis<br>e.g. previous member of the advisory team | MAJOR |
| A3. | Examiner has employed the candidate or been employed by the candidate within the last five years                    | MAJOR |
| A4. | Examiner is in negotiation to directly employ or be employed by the candidate                                       | MAJOR |
| A5. | Examiner has acted as a referee for the candidate for employment  | MAJOR |

#### *Personal relationship*

- |     |  |       |
|-----|--|-------|
| A6. | Examiner is a known relative of the candidate  | MAJOR |
| A7. | Examiner is a friend, associate or mentor of the candidate   | MAJOR |
| A8. | Examiner and the candidate have an existing or a previous emotional relationship<br>of de facto, are co-residents or are members of a common household | MAJOR |

**A. Conflict with the Candidate (continued)**

*Legal relationship*

- A9. Examiner is or was married to the candidate MAJOR
- A10. Examiner is legally family to the candidate (for example, step-father, sister-in-law) MAJOR
- A11. Examiner is either a legal guardian or dependent of the candidate or has power of attorney for the candidate MAJOR

*Business, Professional and/or Social Relationships*

- A12. Examiner is currently in or has had a business relationship with the candidate in the last five years (for example, partner in a small business) MAJOR
- A13. Examiner is in a social relationship with the candidate, such as co-Trustees of a Will or god-parent MAJOR
- A14. Examiner has a current professional relationship, such as shared membership of a Board or Committee (including editorial and grant decision boards), with the candidate MINOR
- A15. Examiner has had personal contact with the candidate that may give rise to the perception that the examiner may be dealing with the candidate in a less than objective manner MINOR

**B. Conflict with the Supervisor/Advisor**

*Working Relationship*

- B1. Examiner was a candidate of the supervisor within the past five years MAJOR
- B2. Examiner has co-supervised with the supervisor in the past five years MAJOR
- B3. Examiner holds a patent with the supervisor granted no more than eight years ago and which is still in force MAJOR
- B4. Examiner had directly employed or was employed by the supervisor in the past five years MAJOR
- B5. Examiner holds a current grant with the supervisor MAJOR<sup>1</sup>
- B6. Examiner has co-authored a publication with the supervisor in the past five years MAJOR<sup>2</sup>

*Personal Relationship*

- B7. Examiner is in negotiation to directly employ or be employed by the supervisor MAJOR
- B8. Examiner is a known relative of the supervisor MAJOR
- B9. Examiner and the supervisor have an existing or a previous emotional relationship of de facto, are co-residents or are members of a common household MAJOR

*Legal Relationship*

- B10. Examiner is or was married to the supervisor MAJOR
- B11. Examiner is legally family (for example, step-father, sister-in-law) to the supervisor MAJOR
- B12. Examiner is either a legal guardian or dependent of the supervisor or has power of attorney for the supervisor MAJOR

*Business, Professional and/or Social Relationships*

- B13. Examiner is currently in or has had a business relationship with the supervisor in the last five years (for example, partner in a small business or employment) MAJOR
- B14. Examiner is in a social relationship with the supervisor, such as co-Trustees of a Will or god-parent MAJOR
- B15. Examiner has a current professional relationship, such as shared membership of a Board or Committee (including editorial and grant decision boards), with the supervisor MINOR
- B16. Examiner has had personal contact with the supervisor that may give rise to the perception that the examiner may be dealing with the candidate in a less than objective manner MINOR

1. Mitigating circumstances may exist, for example where the grant in question is held by a large consortium of relatively independent researchers.

2. Mitigating circumstances may exist, for example where the paper in question has a large author list and where the examiner and supervisor have not collaborated directly.

### C. Conflict with The University

#### *Working Relationship*

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|-----|--|-------|
| C1. | Examiner is currently in negotiation with the University for a work contract (other than examining thesis) | MAJOR |
| C2. | Examiner is currently working for the University pro bono (for example, on a review)                       | MINOR |
| C3. | Examiner has examined for the same Supervisor within the previous two years                                | MAJOR |

#### *Other Relationship*

- |     |  |       |
|-----|--|-------|
| C4. | Examiner has received an Honorary Doctorate from the University within the past five years | MAJOR |
| C5. | Examiner graduated from the University within the past five years                          | MAJOR |
| C6. | Examiner has/had a formal grievance with the University                                    | MAJOR |

#### *Professional Relationship*

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|-----|--|-------|
| C7. | Examiner is a current member of staff or has a current Honorary, Adjunct or Emeritus position with the University or has had such a position during the candidature of the candidate or in the past five years | MAJOR |
| C8. | Examiner has a current professional relationship with the University (for example, membership of a Board or Committee)   | MINOR |
| C9. | Examiner has a current Visiting position with The University or has had such a position during the candidature of the candidate or in the past five years  | MINOR |

### D. Conflict with the subject matter

#### *Research*

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|-----|---|-------|
| D1. | Examiner has a direct commercial interest in the outcomes of the research | MAJOR |
|-----|---|-------|

### E. Conflict with other examiners

#### *Working Relationship*

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|-----|--|-------|
| E1. | Examiner works in the same department/school as another examiner | MAJOR |
|-----|--|-------|

#### *Personal Relationship*

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|-----|---|-------|
| E2. | Examiner is married to, closely related to or has a close personal relationship with another examiner | MAJOR |
|-----|---|-------|

#### *Professional Relationship*

- |     |  |       |
|-----|--|-------|
| E3. | Examiner has a professional relationship with another examiner | MINOR |
|-----|--|-------|

## 3.0 Explanatory Notes

### 3.1 Student – Examiner Conflicts

Within the Curtin system, the identity of examiners must remain confidential throughout the examination process, and afterwards if the examiners wishes. Thus it is important that the supervisor(s) discuss with the student, possible conflicts of interest around potential examiners without disclosing the identity of the examiners.

In terms of working relationship (A1-5), a conflict of interest would only be deemed to exist where an examiner had worked with the student on matters relating to the thesis research, or has maintained contact/correspondence over an extended period where the research was discussed.

No conflict of interest would be deemed to exist where a student had:

- Attended a conference organised by an examiner; and/or
- Given a talk at the examiner's home department; and/or
- Submitted a paper to a journal or proceedings edited by the examiner.

### 3.3 Supervisor – Examiner Conflicts

The most frequent concerns raised by supervisors relate to conflicts of interest between an examiner and a supervisor/advisor, especially with respect to co-authorship (B6). There is occasionally a tension between the need to find an independent examiner and the need to find an examiner with expertise in the field of the thesis, especially where that field is considered to be particularly narrow. It may be useful here to keep in mind that specific expertise in the narrow field of the thesis is not the only (nor necessarily the primary) consideration in selecting a potential examiner. An examiner's broad knowledge of the particular field of research, experience as a supervisor of HDR candidates and examiner of HDR theses, plus their broad familiarity with the expectations of Australian HDR courses are all considerations in the selection of appropriate examiners.

Mitigating circumstances may exist in relation to joint papers (B6), or joint grants (B5), where supervisor and examiner are one of a large number of authors/grant holders who may not necessarily be working together directly.

### 3.4 Major and Minor Conflicts

Conflicts should be disclosed under Part 4 of the Variation to Candidacy Details/Nomination of Examiners form.

In general, minor conflicts will not preclude the use of an examiner.

Major conflicts will preclude an examiner unless it can be shown that there are mitigating circumstances and that the choice of examiner is justified. Where a major conflict exists but the Thesis Committee still wishes to engage the examiner, justification for use of an examiner must be submitted to the Associate Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Research Training for consideration and approval.

### 3.5 Justification for Use of an Examiner where there is a Major Conflict

Prior to submission of the Nomination of Examiners form to the Faculty Graduate Studies Committee (FGSC), the Head of Enrolling Area must request approval of use of the examiner from the Associate Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Research Training. The request and justification may be sent via email.

The original request and the notification of approval for use by the Associate Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Research Training must then be attached to the Nomination of Examiners form when submitted to the FGSC.

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## 4.0 Policies and Guidelines

Supervisors should be aware of the following policies, guidelines and rules.

- Rule 10: Degree of Doctor by Research and Rule 11: Degree of Master by Research, particularly Section 12, Thesis Examining Panel ([http://policies.curtin.edu.au/legislation/internallegislation/statutes\\_rules.cfm](http://policies.curtin.edu.au/legislation/internallegislation/statutes_rules.cfm))
- Guidelines on the Examination Process (<http://research.curtin.edu.au/postgraduate-research/current-research-students/examination-process/>)
- Guidelines for Thesis Committee Members (<http://research.curtin.edu.au/postgraduate-research/hdr-staff/thesis-committee-members/>)
- Code of Conduct (<http://complaints.curtin.edu.au/conduct/index.cfm>)
- Conflict of Interest Procedures (<http://policies.curtin.edu.au/findapolicy/>)
- Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (<http://research.curtin.edu.au/guides/forms/policies.cfm#conduct>)