

GUIDELINES

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LTH, Faculty of Engineering
Faculty office
*This is an informal translation of the
Swedish original*

Guidelines for examining committee composition and conflict of interest situations

The 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. If the supervisor is the department's director of studies, the head of department steps in. In cases where the department's director of studies is prevented from attending the preparation meeting, the head of department/deputy head of department steps in.

The proposal is reviewed by a group of directors of third cycle studies and a Research Programmes director (FU leader).

For this review, the group must have access to the registration of the public defence with the following documents:

- The signed protocol from the preparation meeting
- Signed statements regarding the proposed faculty opponent and the members of the examining committee and deputies
- A draft of the thesis in an assessable condition
- An account of the doctoral student's contribution to any papers included in the thesis

- The latest version of the Individual study plan (ISP) and a statement of the final review
- A popular science summary in Swedish or English (to be reviewed by the the department's director of studies)

When the protocol is signed by all, the registration for the defence can be made.

If substantial parts of the thesis are not completed, the doctoral student and the supervisor must explain that they find it within reason to complete on time. In the event of a change of examination committee after the registration of the public defence has been submitted, a new preparation meeting protocol is prepared with the change, this applies until the registration of the public defence has been approved. After the registration has been approved the changes are notified and this is then approved by the relevant FU leader.

The FU leader makes, by delegation, a decision on the composition of examination committees and the Research Programmes Board (FUN) is to be informed at the upcoming meeting on decided examination committees.

Substitutes in case of unavailability

In the event that the FU leader is unavailable, another appointed FU leader will step in.

External reviewers are subject to the same rules regarding conflict of interest at licentiate seminars and at public defences of doctoral theses.

Examining committee and external reviewer

The examining committee is to be composed of three members 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 degree
- is not to be working at the faculty or department concerned, unless there is a special reason.

The examining committee:

- Member and substitute shall have a PhD degree
- 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

Even if a member or substitute drops out, the examining committee is to fulfil the requirements listed above.

The following points must be fulfilled:

- The majority of members must have qualifications required for appointment as an associate professor, or equivalent. For Swedish members, the requirement is fulfilled if you are an associate professor (docent)/professor.
- A member from an international institution is considered to have qualifications equivalent to a docent if he or she has corresponding merits, such as substantial academic output after doctoral thesis and some experience in supervision of doctoral students.

Substitutes should meet the above requirements.

The following points should be fulfilled:

- Members of both genders should participate and
- At least one member, or the external reviewer, should as far as it is possible, be of the same gender as the author of the thesis

- There should be at least one member from another national higher education institution and preferably also international representation in the examining committee/external reviewer, as LTH's doctoral education should be at a high international level (LTH's strategic plan). For some individual subjects, it is however natural to recruit nationally.

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 prior to the registration of a public defence that one of the points above cannot be fulfilled, the responsible FU-leader 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. The same rules regarding conflict of interest applies for the review of a licentiate thesis as for the defence of doctoral theses.

It can often be difficult to determine where the boundary is for conflict of interest. FUN offers 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 (2017:900), 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.
- manager/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, FUN has 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 FU-leader for a discussion prior to a registration being made (and appropriately also before member/external reviewer is contacted). If a 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 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, or vice versa, (or the supervisors have had the proposed member/opponent as a 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.)
- 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.
- 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 and where participation in larger networks generated co-publication without direct collaboration. NO COI.

Relationship of dependency of a financial nature

- The proposed member/external reviewer and supervisor have applied for (in the previous 5 years) and been granted joint funding or have planned to apply jointly for funding. If 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 is employed at a company that owns the rights to the research results in the thesis or has funded the research. Considered as COI.
- The member/external reviewer works at a company where the supervisor has a role as co-owner, board member, etc. Considered as COI.