

Higher Degree Examiner Conflict of Interest Guide

Thesis examination at UNSW is an important aspect of assuring quality in our Higher Degree Research programs. It is important that the thesis is examined independently from the conduct of the research and that the process is free from any actual or perceived bias or preferential treatment.

Some important Col issues when considering the nomination of examiners for HDR theses:

- The aim of declaring Col is to protect the candidate, examiner and the university against potential negative perceptions during the thesis examination process.
- A Col can exist in fact or in perception.
- A Col may be with the institution, any of the supervisors, other examiners, or the candidate.
- The existence of a Col does not automatically preclude a nominee being approved as a thesis examiner.
- Full details must be provided on the potential conflict to ensure that an informed evaluation can be made.
- The supervisor or the PGC cannot determine a Col. They must declare any issues so that an independent decision can be made.
- Failure to declare a Col is a serious matter and can have severe consequences on the examination process. If a conflict is subsequently discovered, the examiner report/s must be annulled, and a replacement examiner must be appointed.

If a Col is declared, the Associate Dean Research Training/HDC (or equivalent) will evaluate and recommend an outcome, which is sent to the Dean of Graduate Research for approval.

This establishes a level of independence from the nomination process, and ensures that the evaluation has been undertaken appropriately, and that UNSW's policy has been followed.

To avoid conflicts of interest the following list will assist in managing the selection of thesis examiners. Please note that this is not an exhaustive list and all COIs not mentioned here must be declared and discussed.

Relationships that would normally exclude a potential examiner include:

Working:

- Examiner has co-authored a paper with the candidate or supervisors¹ within the last 5 years
- Examiner holds a current grant with a supervisor
- Examiner holds a patent with a supervisor granted no more than 8 years ago and which is still in force
- Examiner must not have been an employee of the University within the past 5 years
- Examiner has directly employed or been employed by a supervisor or the candidate within the past 5 years
- Examiner is in negotiation to directly employ or be employed by the candidate, supervisors or UNSW
- Examiner was a PhD candidate with one of the supervisors within the past 5 years
- Examiner has worked with the candidate on matters regarding the thesis (e.g. previous member of the supervisory team)
- Examiner has acted as referee for the candidate or supervisor for employment
- Examiner has co-supervised with a supervisor in the past five years

Personal/Legal:

- Examiner is legally family or known relative to either a supervisor or the candidate or is a legal guardian or has power of attorney for either a supervisor or the candidate

Business/Professional:

- Examiner is currently in or has had a business relationship with the candidate or a supervisor in the last 5 years (for example, partner in a business or employment)
- Examiner has a direct commercial interest in the outcomes of the research
- Examiners has a current professional relationship, such as shared membership of a Board or Committee (including editorial and grant decision boards), with a supervisor

Other:

- Examiner has a formal grievance with UNSW
- Examiner is a current academic member of staff at UNSW or has a current Honorary, Adjunct or Emeritus position or is a Conjoint Title holder with UNSW
- Examiners working for the same institution or having a personal or business relationship with each other¹

The University of Western Australia has developed a list of detailed COIs, and the impact of such conflicts, which can also be used to provide further guidance in COI issues

[Examples of examiner conflict of interest from UWA website](#)

¹ "Supervisor" means anyone involved with the candidate in a supervisory capacity such as a joint, secondary supervisor, or other advisor.