

External Examiner Regulation Amendments

Brian Campbell, Associate Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

Our regulations are modeled on standard practices across the Canadian university system and have operated quite well and so we are not suggesting any major changes to the supervisory or examining committee structures or processes at this time. However, over the last few years a number of situations have arisen where we have had some differences across the university in interpreting the expertise and independence requirements for different types of examiners. We need greater clarity in order for us to set the minimum standard requirements. The following amendments were passed unanimously at the November meeting of the Graduate Studies Committee. There are 5 main issues that are addressed in the amendments.

1. Relevant Expertise Minimum Requirements for Master's External Examiners, Candidacy Exam and PhD University Examiners

The amendments make it clear that the requirements for master's external examiners, PhD candidacy exam external examiners and PhD "university" examiners are the same. All of these roles are to be filled at minimum by internal faculty members with relevant expertise and arm's length relationships with the student and the supervisor(s). The amendments clarify that an examiner for these situations need not be a specialist in the specific subject matter of the thesis but rather must minimally have expertise that is relevant to the subject matter of the thesis. This has already been our practice within many programs but there have been questions about this issue because the wording of our regulations has not been sufficiently clear. Some programs have sought a more highly specialized level of expertise for some master's thesis externals and have had to go outside of the university in order to achieve this. Of course setting out that relevant expertise and not specialized expertise is the minimum requirement does not rule out using faculty members with highly specialized expertise, if the program desires or if this is easily available internally. The critical point is that the intent of our regulation has always been that normally these examiners would be internal to the university and that specific expertise may not be available. The role of these examiners is directed at a collegial arm's length quality check on a thesis drawing on expertise relevant to the thesis and not at considering that this type of examiner needs to be a leading authority on specialist subject matter. This is in contrast to the PhD external examiner which requires a high level of specialization and experience in the subject matter of the thesis as well as being external to the university.

2. Clarifying PhD External Organizational Independence

The amendments make it clear that all forms of association and affiliation with the university are included when we say that a PhD external must not be associated or affiliated with the university. All forms of employment as well as adjunct and visiting appointments count as part of being associated or affiliated with the university. We have adopted some key elements of the wording used in Tri-Council regulations for reviewer independence on this issue and have specified that we will adopt the Tri-Council 6 year standard for independence. We also have adopted the Tri-Council independence standard of ties established in the immediate future as relevant to the present. For example, a faculty member who was to begin his or her appointment with the university in July could not be considered independent of the university in June because being tied to the university was part of his or her immediate future.

3. The Use of Tri-Council Concepts and Wording in Defining Conflict of Interest

There has been much discussion over the last few years at UOIT over how to interpret conflicts of interest in considering the independence of graduate examiners. In these discussions there has been a universal acceptance that the Tri-Council concepts and wording for independence constitute the standard and when pressed for an interpretation we have used this standard in our interpretations. The amendments make this standard clear by adapting the Tri-Council wording to the situation of conflicts of interest for examiners. This gives us a strong rationale for the validity of our quality standards on conflict of interest and provides a clear path for interpretation.

We have reorganized the regulation with the main body of the conflict of interest language in one place thus resulting in shorter descriptions that can more succinctly deal with the different requirements for each type of examiner.

4. External Examiner Rotation

Repeatedly being an examiner for the same supervisor establishes a relationship and undermines the appearance of independence of the examiner. We have experienced a number of situations where the same examiner has been returned to multiple times and in some cases this has occurred within a very short period of time. The convenience of returning to the same people is understandable, especially if their expertise is relevant and their adjudication valuable. However, research universities such as the University of Toronto manage the difficulties and inconvenience of creating a greater independence for examiners through rotation. This sets a standard that we need to meet if we are to compete on credibility with established research universities.

We have looked at various models for the rotation of external examiners and are proposing 2 years for PhD external examiners in relation to the supervisor. This is the model that is followed at the University of Toronto. There are stronger rotation regulations in Canada, most notably at UBC and at the University of Guelph, where externals cannot be reused for 3 years. In addition, in these amendments we have adopted a 1 year rotation rule in relation to the supervisor for Master's externals, candidacy exam externals and PhD university examiners. In conjunction with the liberal expertise requirements from point 1 above this type of rotation should be easily manageable.

5. Documentation

The proposals make it clear that a written rationale and a CV are required documentation for all examiners. Many programs already do this for all and it is presently required for the PhD. This amendment makes our best practice consistent and helps us to prepare a documented paper trail for review and audit.

3.8.4.2 External and university Examiners

Conflicts of Interest

Conflicts of interest must be avoided for all examiners. A conflict of interest is a conflict between a person's duties and responsibilities with regard to the examination process, and that person's private, professional, business or public interests. Conflicts of interest include real, perceived or potential conflicts. Examiners must not be closely linked with either the candidate or the research supervisor in a personal, financial or research capacity. Key examples of conflicts of interest are set out below.

Examiners should not have had any direct contact with the candidate as a graduate student, nor have any plans to collaborate with or employ the candidate in the immediate future.

Examiners must not have been teaching or supervising a spouse, family member or relative of the candidate or of the supervisor within the last 6 years. Correspondingly, supervisors also must not have been teaching or supervising a spouse, family member or relative of examiners within the last 6 years.

Examiners should not have been closely professionally affiliated with a supervisor, as a result of having been a supervisor or a trainee of the supervisor; or having collaborated, published or shared funding with the supervisor within the last 6 years; or having plans to collaborate in the immediate future.

Should the candidate's dissertation contain chapters or sections of previously published works, an examiner shall not have been involved in the review or editing of this material in any capacity.

Master's candidates

The master's external examiner has expertise that is relevant to the thesis subject matter and normally is a faculty member at UOIT, although examiners external to the university may be appointed. External examiners should not have been an external examiner for another master's student with the same supervisor within the last year.

The external examiner is appointed by the Dean of Graduate Studies upon recommendation of the graduate program director. A curriculum vitae for the recommended examiner and a written rationale for the choice must be provided to the Dean of Graduate Studies.

Doctoral candidates

Both university and external examiners should hold the rank of full or associate professor (or equivalent) if they are at a university, or of comparable expertise and standing if not at a university. The university examiner has expertise that is relevant to the thesis subject matter and normally is a faculty member at UOIT, although examiners external to the university

may be appointed. An external examiner for a PhD dissertation is a well-qualified, objective and experienced individual who has considerable direct knowledge in the field of study of the subject matter.

University examiners may have been the external for the same student's candidacy exam. University examiners should not have been a university examiner for another PhD student with the same supervisor within the last year.

External Examiners will not have been associated or affiliated with UOIT during the last 6 years through any type of employment or adjunct or visiting position nor have any plans to do so in the immediate future. External examiners should not have been an external examiner for another PhD student with the same supervisor within the last 2 years.

The university and external examiners are appointed by the Dean of Graduate Studies upon recommendation of the graduate program director. A curriculum vitae for each recommended examiner and a written rationale for the choice must be provided to the Dean of Graduate Studies.

3.8.1 PhD candidacy examinations

Each student in a doctoral program is required to prepare a written thesis proposal and pass a candidacy exam. Full-time students are expected to do so within 18 months of their initial registration in the program. The examination is to determine whether the candidate has the appropriate knowledge and expertise to undertake a thesis in the selected field of study.

A candidacy committee conducts the examination. This committee consists of the following members:

- The student's supervisor(s).*
- At least two additional members from the student's supervisory committee (the student's supervisory committee must be established prior to the oral examination).*
- Graduate program director (or delegate) as chair. The chair cannot be a member of the student's supervisory committee.*
- The external examiner for a candidacy exam has expertise that is relevant to the thesis subject matter and normally is a faculty member at UOIT, although examiners external to the university may be appointed.*
- Examiners should not have been an examiner for another PhD student's candidacy exam with the same supervisor within the last year.*
- The conflict of interest regulations for external and university examiners in thesis defenses also apply to candidacy external examiners (see Section 3.8.4.2).*

- *The external examiner is appointed by the Dean of Graduate Studies in consultation with the graduate program director. A curriculum vitae for the recommended examiner and a written rationale for the choice must be provided to the Dean of Graduate Studies.*

All members of the committee are voting members. In the case of co-supervision, co-supervisors collectively have one vote.
