

GUIDELINES ON CONFLICT OF INTEREST IN THESIS EXAMINATION

Background

Victoria University's approach to thesis examination and the appointment of examiners to undertake such examinations conforms to national guidelines as enunciated in the Australian Qualifications Framework and the associated Guidelines endorsed by the Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies of Australian universities. An important consideration in the appointment of examiners within the Australian system is that of ensuring the integrity of the processes leading to the appointment of examiners, especially in relation to managing conflicts of interest.

While considerations of conflict of interest have been an essential part of the VU process for appointing examiners for a number of years, these more detailed guidelines have been developed and which have been endorsed by the University's Research Executive Group to provide greater clarity and ensure consistency in the application of criteria across Faculties. They closely follow guidelines initially developed by the Go8 universities and endorsed by the Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies of all Australian universities (Australian Council of Graduate Research).

Overview

Please note the following points:

- A conflict of interest may be with the institution, the supervisor or the candidate;
- The existence of a conflict of interest does not automatically preclude a nominee being approved as a thesis examiner. When considering a recommendation of a nominee, the Chair of Examiners looks at the nature and severity of any conflict(s) of interest (COI), and makes a recommendation, which is then reviewed by the Dean, Graduate Research;
- The aim of the COI guidelines is to protect the candidate, examiner and the University against potential negative perceptions during the thesis examination process. It is not a presumption that an individual will behave inappropriately;
- Examiners will be known to students on nomination;
- Appointed examiners, students and supervisors will be all advised that if a perceived or objective conflict of interest emerges during the course of the examination process, they have a responsibility to inform the University;

Examiners will be notified that the student will know that they are appointed as examiner and will be required to notify the University immediately if a student contacts them

In the interest of clarity the examples of conflict of interest have been divided into two groups:

- **Major Conflicts** - these conflicts are considered substantial and would normally result in the non-appointment of the examiner;
- **Minor Conflicts** – these conflicts should be declared and explained, but should not inhibit the appointment of the examiner. However, please be aware that several conflicts of interest that are individually minor, in combination, may be considered substantial, and could lead to a recommendation not to appoint an examiner.

Major Conflicts of Interest Resulting in Non-Appointment of Examiner

	Conflict with the Candidate	Conflict with the Supervisor	Conflict with Victoria University	Conflict with the subject matter	Conflict with other examiners
Working Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examiner has co-authored a paper with the candidate within the last five years; • Examiner has worked with the candidate on matters regarding the thesis e.g. previous member of the supervisory team; • Examiner has employed the candidate or been employed by the candidate within the last five years; • Examiner is in negotiation to directly employ or be employed by the candidate; • Examiner has acted as a referee for the candidate for employment. • Examiner who has acted as an external reviewer of the candidate's Confirmation of Candidature and/or Mid Candidature Review 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examiner was a candidate of the supervisor within the past five years; • Examiner has co-supervised with the supervisor in the past five years; • Examiner holds a patent with the supervisor granted no more than eight years ago and which is still in force; • Examiner had directly employed or was employed by the supervisor in the past five years; • Examiner holds a current grant with the supervisor (this is a severe case of COI but mitigating circumstances may exist); • Examiner has co-authored a publication with the supervisor in the past five years (this is a severe case of COI but mitigating circumstances may exist). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examiner is currently in negotiation with VU for a work contract (other than examining thesis). 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examiner works in the same department/school as another examiner.

	Conflict with the Candidate	Conflict with the Supervisor	Conflict with Victoria University	Conflict with the subject matter	Conflict with other examiners
Personal Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examiner is a known relative of the candidate; • Examiner is a friend, associate or mentor of the candidate; • Examiner and the candidate have an existing or a previous emotional relationship, are co-residents or are members of a common household. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examiner is in negotiation to directly employ or be employed by the supervisor; • Examiner is a known relative of the supervisor; • 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. 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examiner is married to, closely related to or has a close personal relationship with another examiner.
Legal Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examiner is or was married to or in a recognised civil or de facto relationship with the candidate; • Examiner is legally family (for example, step-father, sister-in-law) to the candidate; • Examiner is either a legal guardian or dependent of the candidate or has power of attorney for the candidate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examiner is or was married to the supervisor; • Examiner is legally family (for example, step-father, sister-in-law) to the supervisor; • Examiner is either a legal guardian or dependent of the supervisor or has power of attorney for the supervisor. 			
Business, Professional and/or Social Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 or employment); • Examiner is in a social relationship with the candidate, such as co- 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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); • Examiner is in a social relationship with the supervisor, such as co- 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examiner is a current member of staff or has a current Honorary, Adjunct or Emeritus position with VU or has had any of the above such a position during the candidature of the candidate or in the past 5 years (this is a severe 		

	Trustees of a Will or god-parent.	Trustees of a Will or god-parent.	case of COI but mitigating circumstances may exist).		
	Conflict with the Candidate	Conflict with the Supervisor	Conflict with Victoria University	Conflict with the subject matter	Conflict with other examiners
Other Relationship			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examiner has received an Honorary Doctorate from VU within the past five years; • Examiner graduated from VU within the past five years; • Examiner has/had a formal grievance with VU. 		
Research				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examiner has a direct commercial interest in the outcomes of the research. 	

Minor Conflicts of Interest that should be advised to the College Director, Research Training

	Conflict with the Candidate	Conflict with the Supervisor	Conflict with Victoria University	Conflict with other examiners
Working Relationship			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examiner is currently working for VU pro bono (for example, on a review). • Examiner has examined for VU 2 or more times in the past 12 months and/or 5 or more times in the past 5 years (mitigating circumstances may involve examination for candidates across different Colleges/Centres/Institutes of the University). Multiple use of one examiner within a College/Centre/Institute or by one supervisory team will not be approved. 	
Business, Professional and/or Social Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examiner has a current professional relationship, such as shared membership of a Board or Committee (including editorial and grant decision boards), with the candidate. • 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. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examiner has a current professional relationship, such as shared membership of a Board or Committee (including editorial and grant decision boards), with the supervisor. • 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. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examiner has a current professional relationship with VU (for example, membership of a Committee or Board). • Examiner has a current Visiting position with VU or has had such a position during the candidature of the candidate or in the past 5 years. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examiner has a professional relationship with another examiner.

(Adapted from the guidelines developed originally by the University of Western Australia and the University of Queensland and Australian Council of Graduate Research, 2018 with grateful acknowledgement).

First approved by the Postgraduate Research Committee, August, 2011. Minor Amendments May 2016 and June 2020.