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Appointing external reviewers, examining committees and chairpersons for the public defence of doctoral theses

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1. Introduction

The vice-chancellor's regulations on the public defence and grading of doctoral theses lay down provisions, among other things, on the date and location for the public defence, including participation by remote means, as well as general rules for the examining committee and the grading of doctoral theses¹.

These guidelines supplement the vice-chancellor's regulations and are adopted jointly by the faculty boards.

2. External reviewer

An external reviewer must be appointed for the public defence².

The external reviewer must hold at least the qualifications required for appointment as a docent or possess equivalent qualifications obtained abroad. However, if there are special reasons, a person holding at least a doctoral degree may be appointed. 'Special reasons' primarily refers to considerations of expertise.

The external reviewer shall be a person who is not active at Örebro University, unless there are exceptional reasons to the contrary. The person may well be based abroad.

Being 'active' refers to being employed or affiliated, holding an assignment, or otherwise having a significant connection, for example through research collaboration.

'Exceptional reasons' primarily refers to circumstances that at short notice prevent the appointed external reviewer from participating.

3. Examining committee

In the grading of the doctoral thesis, at least one person shall participate who is not active at the higher education institution awarding the degree³.

The grade for a doctoral thesis shall be determined by an examining committee, which is appointed specifically for each thesis. The examining committee shall consist of three or five members. A person who has served as supervisor to the doctoral student may not be a member of the committee. The committee shall appoint a chairperson from among its members⁴.

3.1 Qualifications

The members of the examining committee must hold at least the qualifications required for appointment as a docent or possess equivalent qualifications obtained abroad.

¹ Regulations on the public defence and grading of doctoral theses at Örebro University (ORU 2025/08914)

² Chapter 6, Section 33, Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100, HEO)

³ Chapter 6, Section 34, HEO

⁴ Section 6, Regulations on the public defence and grading of doctoral theses at Örebro University (ORU 2025/08914)

3.2 Institutional affiliation

No more than one member of the examining committee may be active at Örebro University in the subject area to which the doctoral student belongs. In the case of medical science, the term 'subject area' refers to the specific specialisation within the subject to which the doctoral student belongs⁵.

Being 'active' refers to being employed or affiliated, holding an assignment, or otherwise having a significant connection, for example through research collaboration.

3.3 Gender balance

Both genders shall be represented on the examining committee, unless there are special reasons to the contrary. 'Special reasons' primarily refers to considerations of expertise.

3.4 Alternate member

An alternate member of the examining committee shall be appointed⁶. The alternate member shall be prepared to step in as a member of the examining committee at short notice if the need arises. If the alternate member is required to step in, the examining committee as a whole must continue to meet the requirements set out above.

4. Chairperson

The public defence shall be chaired by a chairperson, who must be a member of the teaching staff at the university and employed until further notice⁷. The chairperson shall be a professor or docent. A person who has served as supervisor to the doctoral student may not be appointed as chairperson.

5. Conflicts of interest

To ensure legal certainty for the doctoral student, it is essential that the doctoral thesis and its defence are assessed objectively and impartially. It is therefore important that issues of conflicts of interest are identified and addressed when the school is drafting the proposal for the public defence.

A 'conflict of interest' refers to any circumstance that may undermine the confidence of an external observer in a person's impartiality in the handling of a matter. This may involve a situation in which a person could be perceived as having an interest in the matter that might influence their position or judgement. An assessment of conflict of interest therefore involves considering whether there are circumstances that could typically result in a person handling a matter in a partial manner. Thus, the assessment

⁵ The specialisations within medical science are however broad in nature. Having two members of the examining committee representing the same specialisation may be permitted, provided that the members in question can certify that no conflicts of interest exist between them.

⁶ Section 6, Regulations on the public defence and grading of doctoral theses at Örebro University (ORU 2025/08914)

⁷ Section 4, Regulations on the public defence and grading of doctoral theses at Örebro University (ORU 2025/08914)

does not concern the risk that a specific person will *in fact* act partially, but rather how the situation may be perceived by others.

The rules governing the public defence contain several general provisions concerning organisational restrictions, for example limits on the number of members of the examining committee who may come from the subject area concerned or from the university itself. These provisions are intended to ensure an impartial and objectively based assessment, thereby preventing conflicts of interest.

However, a conflict-of-interest assessment must be carried out for each individual appointed as external reviewer or as a member of the examining committee. This assessment shall cover affiliations both with the doctoral student and with the doctoral student's principal supervisor and assistant supervisor(s).

5.1 Assessment of conflicts of interest

The Swedish Administrative Procedure Act (Section 16) sets out several grounds for conflicts of interest. For example, a person is considered disqualified from involvement in a matter due to a conflict of interest if they, or a close associate, are a party to the matter, or may otherwise be affected by the decision to a not insignificant extent (so called party, interest, or close association conflicts of interest).

There is also a more generally worded conflict of interest rule that addresses situations not covered by the grounds mentioned above. Under this so-called general clause, a person is considered disqualified due to a conflict of interest if there is any other specific circumstance that may give rise to doubts about the person's impartiality in the matter. It is often this broader ground for conflict of interest that is the most difficult to assess.

Examples of situations that may provide guidance in this assessment are listed below⁸.

It is important that each situation is assessed on the basis of the circumstances of the individual case, and that due consideration is given to the nature, extent, and duration of the relationships that could constitute a conflict of interest.

Particular difficulties may arise in cases where the subject or research area is narrow and the number of individuals with the relevant expertise who may be considered for appointment as external reviewer or member of the examining committee is relatively limited. In such cases, an overly strict application of the conflict of interest rules may make it difficult to identify appropriately qualified participants for the public defence. However, a precautionary principle should always serve as the starting point – the credibility and legitimacy of the university and of the public defence must always be safeguarded. Even if a conflict of interest does not arise in the eyes of the Administrative Procedure Act, it is nevertheless unfortunate if attention is drawn to the possible impartiality of the individuals involved rather than to the quality of the thesis.

It is important that the school accounts for all circumstances identified in the conflict-of-interest assessment, even if the school does not consider them to constitute a conflict of interest.

⁸ The examples are based on the Swedish Research Council's guidelines for the management of conflicts of interest, reg. no 1.2.4-2023-00185

5.1.1 Examples of situations in which a conflict of interest typically exists

Financial or other relationships of dependence

A conflict of interest may arise where there are financial relationships of dependence or other forms of dependency between a person proposed as external reviewer or member of the examining committee and the doctoral student or any of the supervisors. An example of the latter is where one of the supervisors is acting as an external expert in an ongoing matter concerning the person proposed.

Doctoral student–supervisor relationship

A doctoral student–supervisor relationship is regarded as giving rise to a conflict of interest regardless of how long ago the supervision took place. This means that former supervisors or former doctoral students shall not be proposed as external reviewers or as members of the examining committee.

Ongoing or recently concluded close collaborations

A conflict of interest may exist if the proposed external reviewer or member of the examining committee has ongoing or recently concluded close collaborations with the doctoral student or with any of the supervisors. Examples include jointly conducted research, joint applications for research funding, or joint supervision of doctoral students.

Manifest friendship or animosity

Manifest friendship is considered to exist where there is private social interaction. Ordinary collegial relationships, however, do not constitute a conflict of interest.

Manager-employee relationship

The immediate manager of the doctoral student or of any of the supervisors should not be proposed as external reviewer or as a member of the examining committee.

5.1 2 Examples of situations in which there is a risk of conflicts of interest

Joint authorship

As a general guideline, appointments as external reviewer or member of the examining committee should be avoided where joint authorship with the doctoral student or with any of the supervisors has occurred within the past five-year period. A single jointly authored article or a jointly written chapter in an edited volume may be sufficient to constitute a conflict of interest. Joint publication that took place more than five years ago may also give rise to a conflict of interest. The decisive factor is whether, in professional terms, the collaboration can be regarded as close, which must be assessed on a case-by-case basis. Exceptions may be made, for example, in the context of large multicentre studies involving many independent authors.

Editorship of a journal or an edited volume does not in itself constitute a conflict of interest in relation to chapter authors or co-editors. An assessment of whether a conflict of interest exists must nevertheless be made in each individual case, based on the degree of collaboration involved.

5.2 Inquiry regarding conflicts of interest

Under the Swedish Administrative Procedure Act (Section 18), a person who is aware of a circumstance that may be presumed to render them disqualified from involvement in a matter due to a conflict of interest is obliged to report this to the authority concerned.

This means that, during the preparatory process, the school must request that persons proposed as external reviewer or as members of the examining committee disclose any circumstances that may constitute a conflict of interest.

5.3 Conflicts of interest in the handling of the public defence matter

Conflicts of interest must also be taken into account in the handling of the public defence matter. For example, a supervisor may not present a proposal for the public defence of their own doctoral student for decision by the head of school. A person is also considered disqualified if they propose or appoint themselves to an assignment.

If a conflict of interest is identified, another person shall step in and take over the handling of the matter. If the head of school is disqualified, the deputy head of school shall instead approve the school's proposal for the public defence. If the deputy head of school is also disqualified, the dean shall appoint another person to approve the proposal for the public defence.

6. Reasons for the proposal and other supporting documentation for a decision on the public defence

The following documentation shall be submitted in connection with the school's proposal for a public defence.

1. A concise summary of the thesis, written by the doctoral student in Swedish or English.
2. In the case of a compilation thesis: a list of the component papers that constitute the thesis.
3. If a component paper or the thesis has been jointly authored with another person, the principal supervisor shall provide an account of the doctoral student's contribution to the work.
4. Information shall be provided as to whether a final review, mid-way review, or other quality review has been conducted. The identity of the external experts/reviewers, including their qualifications and institutional affiliation, shall be stated. Minutes or another written statement from the external experts/reviewers shall be attached, as well as the principal supervisor's account of the revisions made to the thesis in response to the experts'/reviewers' comments.
5. A statement of reasons for the proposed appointment of the external reviewer and the members of the examining committee, including the alternate member.
6. If the school proposes that the external reviewer or a member of the examining committee participate in the public defence by remote means, the proposal shall be accompanied by a statement of reasons why participation is to take place by remote means rather than in person.
7. Information shall be provided regarding conflict-of-interest assessments concerning the persons proposed as external reviewer and as members of the examining committee.

8. Where special or exceptional reasons are required for a particular decision under the vice-chancellor's regulations or these guidelines, such reasons shall be included.
9. If the school has consulted the dean or the Faculty Office at an earlier stage of the preparatory process, this information shall be included.

7. Deadline for submission of the proposal

The proposal for a public defence shall be submitted by the head of school no later than two months prior to the proposed date of the public defence and should, prior to submission, have been subject to collegial consultation in the supervisors' committee or an equivalent body, or with the head of subject/specialisation coordinator.

Enter into force and transitional provisions

These guidelines will enter into force on 30 April 2026 and are to be applied to proposals approved as of this date.