Guidance on the appointment of examiners of research degrees

This guidance has been prepared by Student Registry working with representatives of Degree Committees and endorsed by the Board of Graduate Studies. The Board has an expectation that Degree Committees will critically examine their practice in the light of this guidance, and amend their practice where necessary.

General Requirements
Examiners will normally be expert in one or more aspects of the student’s thesis. It is not expected that either will necessarily be expert in the whole field covered by the thesis, and their expertise will normally be complementary. Examiners should be able to provide a view of the merits of the thesis and its defence in the oral examination, and to set the thesis and its examination in the context of the standards for the degree in the UK. Examiners must be able to provide an independent assessment of a student’s work. Guidance on what might constitute a conflict of interest is included below.

Internal Examiner
- In exceptional circumstances a student’s Adviser or Assessor of an earlier progress report (including the first year assessment) may act as Internal Examiner provided the Degree Committee is satisfied that his or her involvement in the student’s work was not so great as to prejudice his or her role as Examiner.
- If it is not possible to appoint an Internal Examiner, or if the student is also a member of staff, two External Examiners should be appointed. In these circumstances the Degree Committee will advise the Examiners of their responsibilities and will arrange the oral examination. The Degree Committee may wish to appoint an internal Independent Chair.
- The following are eligible to act as Internal Examiner:
  - University Teaching Officers and Affiliated lecturers
  - College Teaching Officers;
  - Senior Research Associates;
  - Retirees on a Voluntary University Contract, Emeritus Professors or Emeritus Readers provided they are still research active;
  - Employees of a University Partner Institute who are eligible to act as a Principal Supervisor
  - Previous employees of Cambridge who are now employed in another HEI and who left Cambridge no more than 6 months beforehand;
- We would usually expect the Internal Examiner to have a PhD and to have experience of supervising doctoral students. Examiners whose experience of supervising or examining is limited should be paired with an External Examiner with more experience.

External Examiner
- Academic or research staff employed at other education establishments are eligible to act as External Examiner(s)
- Academics who were previously employed at Cambridge are eligible to act as External Examiner once a period of 5 years has passed
• External Examiners would normally be expected to have a doctoral degree and have experience of supervising doctoral students.

• The External Examiner should have some experience of examining doctoral students. Where this is not the case, Examiners should be matched with an experienced Internal Examiner.

• For financial reasons, the appointment of non-EEA external examiners should be exceptional and only considered when no appropriate examiner is available from within the EEA. If a non-EEA external examiner is appointed the Board will only pay the return economy airfare and the Examiner’s fee. The department is expected to cover all other travel, accommodation and subsistence costs. If not currently working in the UK, the appointee should ideally have previously examined a PhD in the UK or be fully conversant with the UK PhD system. If not, then it is essential they are paired with a suitably experienced Internal Examiner.

• A visiting academic may be appointed as External Examiner provided their work does not overlap significantly with the student’s and depending on the length of time they have been in Cambridge by the expected viva date and the level of interaction, if any, with the candidate or candidate’s supervisor. The supervisor should make a case to the Degree Committee for consideration.

• Where appropriate given the nature of the research, a researcher who is not an academic member of another University may be appointed as External Examiner. This may be someone with suitable experience from outside the higher education system, eg, from industry or the professions. In these circumstances the External Examiner must be matched with an experienced Internal Examiner and a case made to the Degree Committee explaining why the examiner has been nominated.

What constitutes a conflict of interest?
Appointment of examiners is a matter for the Degree Committees. A potential conflict of interest however leaves the University vulnerable should the outcome of the viva not be that hoped for by the student. Examples of potential conflict of interest include the examiner:

• being a former student under the supervision of the candidate’s supervisor, or having been examined for their research degree by them, unless more than 10 years have elapsed since they completed that degree;

• being line managed or reporting to the candidate’s supervisor;

• being a former supervisor, co-supervisor or advisor of the candidate or providing significant feedback on their project such that they are unable to give an independent view;

• having co-held grants with the candidate or the candidate’s supervisor. Co-held grants involving very large consortia are not normally considered conflicts of interest and other cases may be permitted following consideration by the Degree Committee if extenuating grounds exist;

• the presence of a personal relationship between the student or supervisor and any of the examiners

If the supervisor or the candidate does have such a relationship with the nominated examiner, they are unable to identify a suitable alternative, and do not feel a conflict of interest exists, they can make a case to the Degree Committee to support the appointment.