

# Policy on the appointment of PGR examiners

<b>Policy on the appointment of examiners for PGR degrees</b>	<b>1</b>
Process for the appointment of examiners	1
Considerations in the appointment of external examiners	1
Experience	3
Numbers of candidates examined	3
Considerations in the appointment of internal examiners	4

This policy is for SEE, SCA and departments when considering the appointment of internal or external examiners for research degrees.

This policy forms part of and should be read alongside the [University Policy on Research Degrees](#).

**Principle for the appointment of examiners of research degrees: all examiners must be independent, impartial, have no known conflict of interest and be of suitable professional standing.**

## Process for the appointment of examiners

1. The Recommendation of Examiners form is generated and made accessible to the PGR's department after the PGR has completed their Notification of Intention to Submit form prior to the submission of their thesis. Supervisors should contact their departmental Postgraduate Administrator regarding any queries/access issues with the form.
2. Departments should provide a CV for each external examiner nominated and provide a clear rationale for any exceptions to the norms set out below. It is recommended that any doubts about the perceived suitability of the external or internal examiner are referred to SEE ([pgr-examinations@york.ac.uk](mailto:pgr-examinations@york.ac.uk)) *before* the nomination form is completed.
3. Examiners are appointed by the SCA, acting on behalf of Senate, on the nomination of the relevant Graduate Chair. SEE has delegated authority from the SCA to undertake examiner approval within certain set parameters (decisions are taken by the Deputy Head of Student Administration or their designated alternate or, if necessary, referred onwards to SCA).
4. PGRs should be informed of their prospective examiners and may query the decision but they do not have a veto on their appointment. If a PGR has concerns about the choice of examiner and this has not been resolved through discussion with their department they should flag this to SCA. The decision of SCA is final.
5. If necessary, e.g. as required by a funder/sponsor, external examiners may be required to sign a confidentiality agreement in accordance with [guidance from RKEC](#).
6. If an external examiner is a foreign national based outside the UK and they are planning to come to the UK to conduct the final examination then they may need to [obtain a visa and provide evidence for the border authorities](#).

## Considerations in the appointment of external examiners

### **Professionalism**

We require external examiners to be of suitable professional standing - i.e. to have appropriate levels of academic expertise and experience, and the capacity to command authority and the respect of their

colleagues in their particular field - and to behave with professional responsibility. There are many forms that professional standing may take and these may vary by discipline.

**An external examiner will normally be a senior member (Professor/Reader or equivalent) of the academic staff of another higher education institution or reputable research establishment in the United Kingdom or overseas.** In some disciplines the nominee might be a senior academic member of a relevant professional, statutory or regulatory body. Recently retired academics may be appointed as external examiners but they should be able to demonstrate that they are aware of recent developments in their area of expertise and if more than three years have elapsed since retirement, evidence of continuing research activity or advanced scholarship must be provided as part of the nomination process.

The Graduate Chair should provide a clear rationale for their choice of nominee, explaining their circumstances and how they meet the professionalism criterion, if:

- the nominee is a more junior academic
- queries might be raised about any institution/organisation the nominee is affiliated to (e.g. if the academic standing of the institution/organisation is likely to be unknown or could be questioned)
- the professional standing of a nominee is not obvious, particularly if they have no obvious academic affiliation, e.g. they are an independent scholar or freelancer, or work in industry

### ***Independence***

Independence is normally established by the external examiner being a current academic employee, on a substantial contract, of another university and by their not having been a recent student, PGR or employee of the University of York (a minimum of three years should normally have elapsed since they were a student/PGR/employee at York). Those soon to be employees of the University of York should also be excluded. There must be no connection to the University of York that could suggest that they might feel compelled to make any particular decision.

### ***Impartiality***

Impartiality requires there to be no familial or personal relationship between the external examiner and anyone else involved in the process: PGR, supervisor, internal examiner, Graduate Chair (or whoever signs off the recommendation at departmental level) or anyone else involved in making a decision in the examination process.

It is a feature of academia that people are often required to make impartial academic judgments about someone with whom they have some level of professional relationship (eg when writing references, grading REF submissions, promotions panels etc.) so we should not assume that any existing professional relationship inhibits impartiality.

### ***Conflicts of interest***

Some of the questions on the appointment of examiners form are there to ensure that there is no potential conflict of interest. The form asks the external to declare any potential conflicts of interest.

For an external examiner, conflicts of interest arise when the examiner could have a personal 'stake' in the outcome. This could be, for example, through too strong a connection with the PGR, or the PGR's work or with the work of the supervisor, internal examiner or other staff closely involved in the specific area of the PGRs of work.

The following are conflicts of interest and should be avoided at all costs:

- the external has collaboration or co-authorship with the PGR
- the external has collaboration or co-authorship with the supervisor or internal examiner on topics related to the PGR's research
- the supervisor or internal examiner has recently (within the last six months) examined, or will imminently examine (within the next six months), a PGR in the external's department
- there exists a formal relationship between the external and the department which might have meant working with the PGR (eg honorary visiting professor in same research group)

- the external will supervise the PGR at postdoctoral level and/or has recently been on a hiring committee for the PGR.

The following might present conflict of interest and are to be avoided if possible:

- the external has an academic relationship with the supervisor or internal examiner, such as co-authorship or collaboration or sitting on the same funding committee, on topics that are not in any way related to the PGR's research
- the external has an academic relationship to the department, but this does not involve the PGR as a researcher in any way (eg lapsed or purely honorary Honorary Visiting Professor or regular visits to give lectures)
- the external was the supervisor's supervisor or the supervisor's supervisee
- the external recently supervised (within the last three years) the PGR's dissertation or thesis at another institution as part of a previous taught or research programme
- the external is in a department at another institution where the PGR has an appointed external supervisor for example as part of a doctoral training entity (e.g. if the PGR has a cosupervisor based in Department of X at Leeds as part of a White Rose consortium, the external examiner cannot come from that Department)

The following examples would not constitute conflicts of interest **as long as a period of at least three years has elapsed since the end of the potential conflict of interest:**

- the external was the PGR supervisor's PhD examiner
- the external was examined in their PhD by the PGR's supervisor
- the external examiner examined the PGR in another research programme, e.g. Masters by Research
- the external was supervising PGRs at York in the PGR's department (e.g. legacy supervision following employment at York or as part of a cross-institutional consortium)
- the external was a co-supervisor with the PGR's main supervisor at an institution other than York.

The following examples would not constitute conflicts of interest:

- the external has met the PGR at conferences
- the external knows the supervisor but no collaboration or co-authorship
- the external knows the internal but no collaboration or co-authorship
- the external is a member of the same professional association or body as the supervisor or internal examiner
- the external examiner is also an examiner for a taught degree programme in the department
- the external examiner examined the PGR in a taught programme.

With the permission of SCA, the co-authoring exclusion may be set aside where the coauthoring stems from a very large multinational team with multiple coauthors and the contact between the affected parties is actually limited. In exceptional circumstances only, with the permission of SCA, the collaboration/co-authoring exclusion (external examiner has collaborated/co-authored with the supervisor or internal examiner but not the PGR on topics related to the PGR's research) may be set aside in instances where the field is small and there are very few people with the relevant expertise.

### ***Experience***

If an external examiner is appointed who has limited experience of UK oral examinations, the department should ensure that the internal examiner is experienced and/or an independent chair appointed.

### ***Numbers of candidates examined***

The same external examiner may be appointed to examine no more than two PGR candidates in the same department in any 12-month period, and no more than four PGR candidates in the same department in any 36-month period. Exceptionally, SCA may grant a time-limited exception to the rule governing the number of candidates examined by an external examiner in a particular time frame.

## Considerations in the appointment of internal examiners

### **Eligibility**

An internal examiner will normally be a member of the University's Academic, Research or Teaching staff, other than the candidate's supervisor(s). Academics from HYMS may be appointed as internal examiners if supported by an independent chair to provide the knowledge of York's policies and procedures.

Retired members of the University's Academic, Research or Teaching staff may be engaged to be internal examiners (at the external examiner rate) where this is academically justified and where support can be provided to ensure that the examination is conducted in accordance with current University rules. If more than three years have elapsed since the proposed internal examiner retired, evidence of continuing research activity or advanced scholarship must be provided as part of the nomination process, and an independent chair must be appointed.

A current or former member of the PGR's TAP (other than the supervisor(s)) or a PGR's progression panel may be appointed as an internal examiner, providing that the conditions set out below are met.

Although a member of University staff, and likely appointed from within the PGR's wider research grouping in the PGR's department, the internal examiner must be able to make an independent academic judgement on the candidate's thesis. If the nominated internal does not feel able to do so, for any reason, they must recuse themselves from the examination process.

The same principles of impartiality and conflicts of interest that apply to the appointment of external examiners also apply in relation to appointment of internal examiners. There should be no circumstances in which the internal examiner has a personal or professional interest in the outcome of the examination. Thus:

- There should be no familial or personal relationship (see the University Policy on Personal Relationships) between the internal examiner and anyone else involved in the examination process: PGR, supervisor, internal examiner, Graduate Chair (or whoever signs off the recommendation at departmental level) or anyone else involved in making a decision in the examination process.
- An internal examiner should not have had co-authoring or collaborative involvement in the PGR's current research project, and their work should not be the focus of the PGR's thesis.
- An internal examiner should not have served as an official or unofficial supervisor to the PGR concerned and should not have advised on the final drafting of the PGR's thesis.

### **Experience**

If an internal examiner is appointed who has not had previous experience of being a PGR examiner, then their department should allocate an experienced mentor (who is not the PGR's supervisor) to guide the internal through the process (but note that the mentor does not attend the oral examination unless they are also appointed as an independent chair). Inexperienced internal examiners should also, and additionally, be offered the opportunity for the oral examination to be overseen by an independent chair.

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