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Guidelines for conflict of interest management in third-cycle education at SCI and composition of grading committees

This document has been created to increase transparency and understanding among faculty and supervisors regarding the handling and application of conflicts of interest in third-cycle education (FU) at the School of Engineering Sciences (SCI).

KTH's [Riktlinje om utbildning på forskarnivå](#) (Guidelines for third-cycle education) clearly state that there must be no conflicts of interest between supervisor/doctoral candidate and committee members/opponent, but also impose specific requirements on other persons involved in, for example, a doctoral defense. In some cases, however, it can be challenging to determine where the boundary for conflicts of interest lies, which is precisely what this document aims to provide support for. It is also of great importance that we remain consistent in our handling of conflict of interest issues in the long term, and it is therefore also essential that there is broad support for this document. Coordinator of third-cycle education subjects (FoA) and the school's faculty board have been involved in a consultation process, where they have had the opportunity to comment on the document before a decision was made by the Director of Third-Cycle Education at SCI. The guidelines are inspired by the Swedish Research Council's conflict of interest rules, as well as several governance documents from other universities in Sweden, and discussions among SCI's coordinators of third-cycle education subjects and directors of third-cycle education at SCI ([FA-PA Workshop SCI: 2023-09-26](#)). All documents can be found in the reference list.

Below, a brief introduction to the principle of objectivity and conflicts of interest in general is first provided, which is essential to consider when assessing different conflict of interest situations. A table with examples of conflict of interest situations that SCI has decided to follow is then available from page 3.

1. The principle of objectivity and conflicts of interest

Representatives of Swedish authorities have an obligation to act objectively in accordance with the principle of objectivity as expressed in the [Regeringsformen \(1974:152\) 1 kap.](#) (Instrument of Government) (1974:152) Chapter 1), Section 9 and in the [Förvaltningslagen \(2017:900\)](#) (Administrative Procedure Act) Section 5, paragraph 2. KTH and all other authorities must act factually and impartially and consider everyone's equality before the law. Even the risk that others may perceive that the authority has not observed factuality and impartiality can be contrary to the principle of objectivity.

Conflict of interest refers to circumstances that can undermine confidence that a decision-maker or case handler is impartial in the handling of a matter.

Rules on conflicts of interest are found in the [Förvaltningslagen \(SFS 2017:900\)](#) (Administrative Procedure Act) (SFS 2017:900) Sections 16-18:

- Section 16 describes four different groups of conflict of interest situations
- Section 17 describes the effect of conflicts of interest
- Section 18 describes obligations in cases of conflicts of interest

The handling of conflict of interest issues is also described in KTH's [Riktlinje om utbildning på forskarnivå](#). Two critical points worth emphasizing are:

- **Notification:** *Anyone who is aware of a circumstance that may be assumed to make him or her biased must immediately report this to the authority (SFS 2017:900 Section 18).*

Regarding the third-cycle education at SCI, notification is normally made through the forms to be completed for, for example, application of dissertation defense, but can also be made directly to the director of third-cycle education (FA) at SCI. One has an *obligation* to report conflicts of interest oneself, but other persons can also report a question of conflict of interest.

- **Information:** *A person who is biased may not take part in the handling of the matter and may not be present when the matter is decided (SFS 2017:900 Section 17).*

For example, when *Applying for a dissertation defense*, it is therefore essential to state all circumstances that could be seen as conflicts of interest. Anything else is an **irregularity**. It is then the FA at SCI who examines the conflict of interest issue as soon as possible. Note that it is better to exonerate oneself as the main supervisor by reporting a possible conflict of interest and having the situation examined by the FA, who makes the decision on the matter.

2. Delicacy bias or proximity bias

The most difficult conflict of interest situation to assess in Section 16 ([SFS 2017:900](#)), but also the most common in the third cycle education, is point 4. This group is called *delicacy bias*, also called *proximity bias*, and concerns whether there is any special circumstance that can undermine confidence in the person's impartiality in the matter. Some reasons may be:

- A1. Dependence of an economic nature.
- A2. Manager/employee relationship.
- A3. Close collaboration in a professional sense.
- A4. Obvious friendship, enmity, or disagreement.

A5. That the conditions for an impartial assessment are lacking.

A6. That someone is involved in the matter in such a way that suspicion can easily arise.

The concept of *propriety bias* (Swedish: *delikatessjäv*) means that you may be disqualified if there is any other circumstance (than those in points 1-3 of Section 16 SFS 2017:900) that could call your impartiality in the matter into question.

This means that you may be considered disqualified even if you have not actually failed to meet the requirements for objectivity and impartiality.

Part of the assessment involves considering how it appears from an external perspective that you, who have some kind of relationship to the matter, are participating in the handling of the case.

It is essential to note that in its assessment of conflict of interest issues, the FA does not make any assessment of people's professionalism. Still, in most cases, it is about how the situation appears from the outside, i.e., whether trust can be considered to be undermined for an impartial handling of a matter.

3. Conflict of interest situations according to SCI

In Table 1, examples of common conflict of interest situations can be found. Many of the examples are taken from SCI's cases that arose in 2023, which were first discussed between FA and vice FA and then during the [FA-PA Workshop SCI: 2023-09-26](#). All situations followed by (*) in the table are elaborated in bullet form after the table to provide clarification.

Table 1. Common Conflict of Interest Situations		Reason	SCI's assessment
<i>Scientific Collaboration</i>			
S1.	Conflict of interest exists in scientific collaboration and co-production that has taken place during the last five-year period. (*)	A3	Conflict
S2.	Conflict of interest may exist for a longer period than five years if the scope of co-authorship has been extensive and/or if otherwise close collaboration has occurred. (*)	A3	Conflict
S3.	Co-production that took place more than 10 years ago and where no close collaboration has occurred since is not considered to constitute a conflict of interest. Assessed on a case-by-case basis. (*)	A3	No conflict
<i>Dependencies</i>			
B1.	Close collaboration in a professional sense may exist at small institutions even if one has not specifically worked or written together, which is assessed on a case-by-case basis.	A2, A3	Risk of conflict

B2.	Doctoral student – main supervisor relationship is assessed as a conflict of interest regardless of how long ago the collaboration took place. For exceptions see B9.	A5	Conflict
B3.	Proposed committee member/opponent has a friendship relationship with the assistant supervisor. (*)	A4	Conflict
B4.	The proposed mandatory reviewer for a licentiate thesis/doctoral dissertation has an ongoing collaboration with the assistant supervisor. (*)	A3	Risk of conflict
B5.	The proposed substitute member for the grading committee for a dissertation defense has an ongoing collaboration with the main supervisor/assistant supervisor.	A3	Conflict
B6.	The proposed substitute member in the grading committee for a dissertation defense has an ongoing management assignment at the department for which the main supervisor/assistant supervisor is head. (*)	A2	No conflict
B7.	Supervisor has been responsible for inviting the opponent/committee member to give a presentation at a conference. (*)	A5	No conflict
B8.	Coordinator of a third-cycle education subject (FoA) to which the doctoral candidate is admitted is proposed as mandatory reviewer/substitute member in the grading committee. (*)	A5	No conflict
B9.	A main supervisor proposes their own former supervisor to be the mandatory reviewer for their doctoral student's licentiate thesis/doctoral dissertation. (*)	A5	No conflict
<i>Economic Dependence</i>			
E1.	Generally, the opponent/committee member should be disconnected from joint projects with supervisor/doctoral candidate. Otherwise, there is a conflict of interest. (*)	A1	Conflict
E2.	Proposed committee member/opponent is a recurring guest lecturer in one of the department's Master's/Doctoral courses. (*)	A1	Conflict
E3.	Proposed opponent/committee member is employed by a company that owns the rights to research results in the dissertation or has financed the research.	A1	Conflict
E4.	Proposed committee member/opponent is active in a company where the supervisor has a role as co-owner, board member, etc.	A1	Conflict
E6.	Supervisor/doctoral candidate has recently applied for but not been granted a project proposal together with proposed opponent/examining committee member, or alternatively a planned/submitted application.	A1	Risk of conflict

- **S1:** Co-production (Swedish: *Samproduktion*)
A joint article or a joint chapter in an edited book may be sufficient to constitute co-production. Possible exception: In certain subject areas and scientific contributions, it may occur that one is a co-author on an article without knowing or having worked with all authors. However, a possible conflict of interest situation should always be reported and then assessed by the FA at SCI.
- **S2:** If several articles (≥ 3 articles) have been co-produced within the span of $5 < \text{years} < 10$ years, the scope is considered extensive.
- **S3:** Close collaboration (Swedish: *Nära samarbete*)
For >10 years to be considered a sufficiently long time ago not to undermine trust, no other reason (A1-A6) may exist, such as A3-A4.
- **B3:** Regarding "friendship relation", clear conflict of interest if it involves private meetings. International colleagues where a professional relationship exists should not be seen as a conflict of interest.
- **B4:** In the suitability assessment, one needs to weigh any conflict of interest against the role of the mandatory reviewer. SCI reasons that a mandatory reviewer is not involved in making the final decision on whether a thesis should be approved or not; this task rests with the examining committee. The feedback that a mandatory reviewer can therefore provide if they are an expert in the field should therefore not be disregarded due to collaboration with the assistant supervisor. However, collaboration with the main supervisor is directly inappropriate.

Note: If a mandatory reviewer is proposed despite collaboration with an assistant supervisor, however, they cannot be a substitute member of the grading committee, which is otherwise quite common. See B5.

- **B6:** SCI's assessment is that if it only concerns a manager/employee relationship, there is no conflict of interest as long as no other reason A1-A6 exists.
- **B7:** SCI considers this to be a purely professional relationship if no other reason A1-A6 exists.
- **B8:** No conflict of interest as long as no other reason A1-A6 exists.
- **B9:** No conflict of interest due to the role of the mandatory preliminary examiner (see comment on B4). However, it should be noted that there is a lifelong conflict of interest between supervisor and opponent/committee member/substitute member. Doctoral student – supervisor relationship is assessed in these cases as a conflict of interest regardless of how far back in time one looks.
- **E1:** Operating in joint projects is to be regarded as a conflict of interest. That someone would have a purely administrative role does not matter.
- **E2:** Regarding "guest lecturers", if salary is paid there is an economic dependence and therefore there is a clear conflict of interest. Unpaid guest lecturer for an extended period, there may be exchanged services and favors and is seen as inappropriate. Individual guest lecturers should not constitute a conflict of interest.

4. Composition of grading committee

Requirements for opponent, chairperson, and the composition of the grading committee at dissertation defense are regulated in 6.4.2 [Riktlinje om utbildning på forskarnivå](#). Below are some clarifications on how SCI reasons about exceptions regarding the composition of the examining committee.

- *An examining committee shall be gender-balanced unless special reasons argue against this, and the reasons shall then be stated in the decision to appoint the grading committee.*

When it comes to gender equality, it is usually women who are underrepresented at SCI and need to be considered. SCI has made exceptions in cases where repeated attempts have been made to find a female member for the grading committee in question and there is a female opponent for the dissertation defense in question. A list of at least two women who have been asked and have declined the committee membership assignment must be attached to the application.

SCI reasons that the most important thing is that women are represented in official roles during the dissertation defense. In the above case, in addition to the requirement for a female opponent, SCI prefers additional female representation in the form of the chairperson role.

Main supervisors are encouraged to start the work of assembling grading committees well in advance of the notification of dissertation defense so that the schedule can be maintained for the doctoral candidate and others involved.

- *Each member must have obtained a doctoral degree and a majority of members must be scientifically competent equivalent to docent (Swedish: docent, is the highest academic degree in Sweden).*

Equivalent to docent (≠). SCI holds that individual assessment should only be applied to members employed at foreign universities, foreign companies, or foreign institutions. For members employed at universities, companies, or institutions in Sweden, no individual assessment is conducted; instead, a formal docent title or professorship is required to be considered as having competence equivalent to docent.

5. Licentiate seminar

Requirements for special examiner, chairperson, and examiner at licentiate seminar are regulated in 6.3.2-6.3.4 [Riktlinje om utbildning på forskarnivå](#). The only clarification SCI makes is regarding the special examiner who, according to 6.3.2, must be scientifically competent equivalent to *docent*. Here, the same position applies as for the wording equivalent to *docent* when appointing grading committee members at dissertation defense. See (≠) under 4 above.

References

The following reference list has been important in the preparation of this document. All documents are easily accessible via the web.

- [1] *Guidelines for Third-Cycle Education, KTH (2022), Ref. no. V-2022-0202.*
- [2] *The Swedish Research Council's guidelines for handling conflicts of interest, Swedish Research Council (2023), Ref. no. 1.2.4-2023-00185.*
- [3] *Guidelines on conflicts of interest, University of Skövde (2015), Ref. no. HS2015/906.*
- [4] *Guidelines for third-cycle education at Luleå University of Technology, LTU (2021), Ref. no. LTU-4085-2021.*
- [5] *Guidelines for handling conflict of interest issues at Luleå University of Technology, LTU (2022), Ref. no. LTU-2319-2022.*
- [6] *Conflict of interest rules within the university's area of operation, Uppsala University (2018), Ref. no. 2018/1656.*
- [7] *Conflicts of interest in public service, Swedish Agency for Public Management (2020), ISBN 978-91-88865-28-1.*
- [8] *Do you know when you are biased? Guide for all employees, Inst. of Medicine, University of Gothenburg (2022). Brochure.*
- [9] *Guidelines for the compilation of examining committees including conflict of interest situations, Lund University Faculty of Engineering (2021), Ref. no. U 2021/559.*
- [10] *Guidelines on conflicts of interest, Karolinska Institutet (2019), Ref. no. 1-405/2019.*
- [11] *Guidelines for the composition of the examining committee, Linköping University (2019), TF-FUN 2019-1.5, Ref. no. LiU-2018-03517.*
- [12] *Conflict of interest rules in higher education, Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions (1997). 1997-11-25.*
- [13] *FA-PA Workshop SCI: 2023-09-26, KTH SCI (2023).*