For the meeting of the Board of Graduate Studies to be held on 19 November 2015

Nomination of Examiners for Research Degrees – Conflicts of Interest

1. Introduction

The Board, at its 8 October 2015 meeting, considered a paper (BGS 9/15-16, attached) proposing suggested guidance and procedure for the declaration of potential conflicts of interest in the nomination of examiners for research degrees.

The Board resolved that the Graduate School should provide guidance on situations which may give rise to potential conflicts, noting that the existence of a potential conflict should not automatically rule out the appointment of a specific examiner.

2. Suggested guidance

The Board of Graduate Studies recognises that, due to the nature of the examination process, it is inevitable that in some cases a student or supervisor may have a prior relationship with a proposed examiner. In order to ensure that any such relationship does not affect the integrity of the examination process, Departments should disclose details of any situations which have the potential to impair the ability of the examiner(s) to make a fair and impartial assessment of the student’s thesis.

A non-exhaustive list of potential sources of conflict is provided below:

(a) Nominated examiner’s substantial involvement in the student’s research, for example direct and sustained input/advice into the work being examined, membership of six-month review panels (where appropriate);
(b) Close personal relationship between the nominated examiner and the student, supervisor or other nominated examiner;
(c) Close professional relationship between the nominated examiner and the student, supervisor or other nominated examiner for example joint holding of grants, co-authorship of papers. This may be mitigated by the size and relative independence of the research team;
(d) Nominated examiner having acted as personal tutor to the student;
(e) The work of the nominated examiner is the focus of the student’s research;
(f) In cases where the student’s research has involved collaboration with or funding of research by an external party, the nominated examiner not being independent of that relationship;
(g) Nominated examiner having direct commercial interest in the outcomes of the research;
(h) Nominated examiner working in the same institution/department as another nominated examiner.

The existence of a potential conflict of interest should not necessarily be a bar to the appointment of a nominated examiner. However, departments, examiners and students are required to declare any potential conflicts which may affect the integrity of the examination process at the point of nomination, or in the case of situations that only
become apparent after examiners have been appointment, as soon as reasonably possible.

3. Recommendations

The Board is invited to consider the suggested guidance.

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