

Choosing Thesis Juries: The Costs of Taking a Strict Line on Conflicts of Interest

ÉTUDE DE CAS / CASE STUDY

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Résumé / Summary

This case study examines the conflicts of interest (COI) that can arise in the selection of jury members to evaluate a PhD thesis, and the costs (time, personnel, expertise) associated with trying to avoid COI.

Mots clefs / Keywords

conflict of interest, university, thesis evaluation, juries

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Conflit d'intérêts / Conflicts of Interest

Bryn Williams-Jones is the Editor-in-chief of the Journal and PhD supervisor of Maude Laliberté. As Director of the Axe éthique et santé des populations (ethiquesantepop.ca), Williams-Jones chairs an Advisory Committee on which Christopher McDougall is a member.

*This case study is based on the blog entry "[Examiners and Grad Students](#)" on my [Conflict-of-interest.net](#) website, published Oct 18 2010, and was inspired by a commentary by Yves Laberge "[How external is your external examiner?](#)" in *University Affairs*, and my own experiences with the constitution of PhD juries.*

Background Context

The University is the site of many interesting and challenging conflicts of interest (COI) that go beyond purely financial interests . In many cases, these COI result not from individual misbehaviour, but because of institutional realities that create situations where people necessarily and unavoidably have multiple and potentially conflicting interests . A case in point is how juries are constituted to evaluate graduate theses, whether for the Masters or PhD. When students submit a Masters or PhD thesis for evaluation, it is common (and sometimes even obligatory) to require impartial examiners of various sorts (e.g., external to the student's home department and/or university) to review the thesis. The goal is to ensure that there is rigorous academic review and that the thesis meets widely shared academic standards. However, in light of expanding interdisciplinary and international collaboration, alongside both the increasing irrelevance of geographical location and the hyper-specialization of research fields, it is possible that the people best placed to review a graduate student's thesis may have also collaborated with the supervisor and/or the student.

Academics have multiple obligations (e.g., teaching, research, conferences, grant writing) that can make organising a thesis jury a complicated and time consuming process. Colleagues may refuse to participate because they are simply too busy. While there may be a tacit expectation in the academic community and on the part of a professor's institution that they should participate in evaluating theses, being on a thesis jury is nonetheless volunteer work and often given little credit as compared to research activities (grants and publications). So when one considers professors' other responsibilities, it should not be surprising that for some, reviewing theses will not be a priority. As a result, professors may have to call in favours to get colleagues to review student theses or sit on juries. This is complicated by the fact that there may be little if any funding with which to physically bring in colleagues from out of town to participate in a jury. Although video conferencing can be a useful compromise, it has its own technical, financial and social limitations, particularly with regards to maintaining dynamic interactions. These contextual issues may thus be the source of or instigators for a variety of potentially problematic COI .

The Case

Professor Jones has been a professor for six years and just received his tenure. To date, he's graduated half a dozen of his Masters students and is thus quite familiar with the evaluation process in his department. Specifically, and in compliance with a Faculty policy regarding Masters thesis juries, he has to identify four colleagues who are willing to be named as potential jury members – two as President and two as evaluators – and then submit this list to the Dean's office, where someone (usually the Vice-Dean in charge of student affairs), searches Google Scholar to establish whether Professor Jones or his student have published with any of the suggested jury members in the last five years. This policy was implemented in response to some particularly problematic COI situations that had occurred in previous years, and which had brought into question the independence and objectivity of some jury members (e.g., who were friends and close collaborators of the supervisor), and thus the reputation of the Faculty. Other Faculties have adopted different measures and procedures, including leaving the issue to the discretion of individual departments.

The process of constituting MA juries has sometimes proven to be a time consuming and frustrating process, because Professor Jones' colleagues are all very engaged in research and teaching, and thus have many other commitments. As Professor Jones has been active in building research collaborations both within and outside his department, there are many colleagues who would be ideal

jury members but who cannot participate because of the Faculty's COI provisions. Nonetheless, Professor Jones is an amiable fellow and a good colleague (he regularly accepts to sit on MA juries of his colleagues' students), so he has managed to organise competent (if not ideal) juries to evaluate his students' MA theses, and the results have been invariably positive and rewarding to all involved.

This summer, Professor Jones is hoping to graduate his first PhD student, Jessica Dupuis, who is wrapping up a superb research project that blends a variety of theoretical and conceptual models but applies them to practical, real-world contexts. Jessica already has four of her thesis chapters published in national and international peer-reviewed journals, co-authored with Professor Jones (second author on all the papers), and their colleague Professor Williams (third author on two of the papers) who is a senior professor at another university in the same city. Professors Jones and Williams meet with Jessica to talk through the selection of potential jury members. Jones informs them that according to his Faculty, a PhD jury should normally comprise at least 5 members, and it is up to the supervisor to provide a list of 8 possible candidates for the various positions on the jury, contacted in advance to obtain their approval to be nominated:

1. President (2 names): a voting member, should not be in COI with the student or supervisor;
2. Supervisor (Professor Jones) and co-supervisor if applicable (none, in this case);
3. Internal jury member (2 names): from the University, and should not be in COI with student or supervisor;
4. External jury member (2 names): from outside the University, and should not be in COI with the student or supervisor.
5. Dean's representative (2 names): from the University, a non-voting member to ensure good governance of the meeting.

Identifying 8 colleagues who are willing to read a 200 page PhD thesis and participate in an early summer exam is no mean feat, something made all the more challenging by the COI regulations prohibiting involvement of colleagues with whom Professor Jones or Jessica have collaborated. For a start, this obviously rules out any direct involvement on the part of Professor Williams, who while not a co-supervisor on Jessica's thesis, is a close collaborator with Professor Jones and co-author on two of Jessica's articles.

Professor Jones identifies two colleagues who would likely accept to be President, who are interested in Jessica's research subject in general but certainly not experts, although such expertise is not required of them in their role as President. The same is the case for the Dean's representatives, who do not even need to be in the same field of study, nor are required to read the thesis; they are responsible for ensuring that the process is fair, impartial and conducted in a respectful manner. Nonetheless, Jones has colleagues in mind who would be interested in Jessica's research and so likely to agree to participate.

More difficult, however, is the choice of internal and external jury members; Jessica's research is quite specialised, and Professor Jones is part of a small but vibrant research community with whom he regularly collaborates on research grants and publications. Jessica suggests Professor Smith, one of the professors with whom she took two graduate courses (and got A+ grades in both courses). While not a specialist in Jessica's specific subject, Professor Smith taught on and does research in relevant if tangential subject matter; Jones knows this colleague and agrees that she would be a good choice. For the second internal jury member, they have to stretch even further the boundaries of expertise, and Jones suggests Professor Thomas, a colleague in another Department whose research focuses on one of the theoretical aspects of Jessica's projects, but in an entirely different area and with different applications. Professor Thomas is known to be very tough, but fair, and so they decide to "take the risk" of including her as a potential jury member, even though she could raise very challenging conceptual and theoretical critiques to Jessica's thesis.

For the external examiners, Professor Williams suggests a friend and colleague at a university in a nearby city, who is an expert in the subject matter. Professor Renaud is a nice person who will give a fair evaluation but not be overly harsh. Jones and Williams have both been present at and even participated in unpleasant PhD defences, due to the involvement of either non-expert and/or overly critical and even nasty examiners, so they want to ensure that the jury is balanced and fair to Jessica, while still being rigorous. There is another expert in the field, Professor Beaudoin, who would be ideal, but Jones and Williams know her only by reputation and she is in another province. With only a \$500 budget available from his Faculty to bring in external jury members, Jones suggests to Williams and Jessica that he offer to fly Professor Beaudoin out for a week at his expense (to be paid off a research grant) should she agree to be named as a potential jury member and eventually be chosen by the Dean's office.

After more than two hours of discussion, Professors Jones and Williams, and PhD student Jessica Dupuis, have agreed upon what they think is a viable list of names for the jury, one with a good balance of expertise and rigor given the limits imposed by their Faculty's COI regulation. Jones proceeds to start emailing these colleagues to solicit their participation on Jessica's PhD jury, hoping that they will all accept to be named as possible jury members.

Questions to consider

Professor Jones' Faculty policy on the constitution of MA and PhD juries precludes, in the interest of avoiding COI, the naming of jury members who have collaborated with the student or supervisor on a grant or publication in the last five years.

1. Are co-authorship or collaboration on grants the only relevant COI that the Dean's office should be evaluating in the constitution of a jury?
 - Is a Google Scholar search a sufficient detection method?
 - Is the Dean's office best placed to judge COI of jury members?
2. While important, the identification of potential jury Presidents and Dean's representatives appears to be largely unproblematic.
 - Are there particular concerns that Professor Jones or the Dean's office should have in the choice of these jury members?
3. Does the fact that Professor Smith (potential internal jury member) has taught Jessica in two courses and given her A+ grades pose any problem?
4. Should the fact that Professor Thomas (potential internal jury member) is "tough but fair" and could be very difficult on the jury, or that her research is far more theoretical than is the case for Jessica's applied project, be factors worth considering? Do they create COI?
5. Does Professor Renaud's "being a nice person" not pose a problem of objectivity, and even COI? Such personal characteristics are simply undetectable by the Dean's office.
 - Is it fair that a student must rely on their supervisor's competence and behaviour with colleagues to have a "nice" jury?
6. Would Professor Jones' offer to pay the travel expenses of Professor Beaudoin constitute an undue influence? And is this a legitimate expense for a research grant?
 - If the Faculty were unable to pay, would there be other ways to "blind" the source of funds (Professor Jones) or otherwise create distance to mitigate this financial COI?

7. Should the real difficulties that Professor Jones – and certainly other professors in the Faculty – encounters in constituting an impartial PhD jury committee lead to a re-evaluation of the COI policy?
 - Should expertise be a more important criteria for selection than COI? If so, how can one avoid the perception of bias and favouritism?
 - Would the declaration of relevant COI be a potentially useful solution to the problems of finding expert evaluators? If so, in what cases, for what types of COI?
 - What alternative approaches might be considered to the current restrictive Faculty policy and practice?

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Suggested Readings

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