



University of  
St Andrews

# Academic adjustments guidance document: inclusive learning and teaching in a postgraduate research setting

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<b>Key terms</b>	Academic policies/Assessment, examination and award/Assessing students with disabilities
<b>Purpose</b>	This guidance provides clarification for School staff on the incorporation of inclusive learning and teaching practices in a PGR setting – including supervisory relationship and considerations for the viva.

<b>Version number</b>	<b>Purpose / changes</b>	<b>Document status</b>	<b>Author of changes, role and school / unit</b>	<b>Date</b>
1.1	Separate guidance on 'Inclusive learning and teaching in a PGR setting' issued. Related to updated amendments to the 'Policy on academic	Updated	Deputy Head of Education Policy and Quality (Education and Student Experience)	January 2025

	adjustments for disabled students: guidance for students			
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**ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENTS:**

**GUIDANCE ON INCLUSIVE LEARNING AND TEACHING IN A POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH SETTING**

**Introduction**

Inclusive practice can benefit PGR students, whether or not they have a disability. The following sets out some general guidance on inclusive practice.

For disabled students, some elements of this list may constitute a required adjustment (e.g. ensuring an appropriate sensory environment) or may themselves need further adjustment (e.g. a student with significant social anxiety may not be able to engage in an oral conversation about their needs). If uncertain about a specific case, staff should refer to the Support Plan and/or seek guidance from the Disability Team.

**Promoting positive supervisory relationships**

**Promoting trust**

Fostering a trusting and inclusive environment for individuals with disabilities and neurodivergent conditions is essential, but this is also good practice in all student-supervisor relationships. Having an honest conversation with the student at the start of their PGR journey will allow you to agree expectations for the student and for yourself as a supervisor. If necessary, co-develop strategies for completing necessary elements, e.g. research logs, presentations.

**Ask about adjustments, not medical evidence**

Avoid requesting medical evidence of disabilities unless you are a disability advisor. Instead, consider initiating an open dialogue about adjustments or practices which promote inclusivity. For example, you could ask a student at the start of their programme if there are any accommodations that would enhance collaboration without pressuring them to share details of their disability.

Adopt an inclusive design perspective; all students can benefit from a discussion about how they work best, their preferred communication style, and any other accommodations that would support their success.

**Personalised approach**

Every student is different, and each individual's experiences with disabilities or neurodivergence will vary. Some, having lived with their condition for a long time, will be aware of their needs and comfortable discussing accommodations which they find helpful. Others may be newly diagnosed, have recently acquired a disability, or find that accommodations that have worked for them in the past are less effective in postgraduate research study. These individuals may need more time to experiment with different accommodations to find out what works best for them.

**Clear communication and expectations**

Provide a clear overview of the timeline and expected outcomes for the student's degree and for supervisory sessions. This allows all students to have a transparent view of their learning journey. Be mindful of the power dynamics in any supervisor/student relationship. Ask the student about their preferred communication methods and how they work best.

**Structured sessions with agreed actions**

Structure teaching and supervisory sessions with clear overviews and agreed-upon actions and expectations. This clarity helps students stay on track and engaged in their learning process.

Some students may find it helpful to order tasks or deadlines so that they can focus on one thing at a time.

### **Booking and flexibility**

Schedule supervision meetings well in advance. Consider setting up recurring, pre-planned meetings for added predictability. Allow flexibility in meeting formats, as far as possible, including flexible scheduling to accommodate diverse needs and remote sessions (although if the student holds a student visa consultation is required with the Student Immigration Compliance Team before any changes are agreed to the student's in-person attendance to ensure the student remains compliant with the conditions of their visa).

### **Note-taking freedom**

Allow students to take notes in a way that they find most comfortable.

### **Constructive feedback**

Discuss with the student their preferred ways of receiving and processing information (visual, written, oral) and stick to this format as far as possible.

Offer feedback that clearly explains how students can enhance their work. Consider rephrasing feedback and using visual aids when appropriate to facilitate better understanding.

## **Considerations for the viva**

Begin by having a conversation with the student to discuss what arrangements would support them to do their best in the viva. Many of these practices can be applied universally and would improve the experience for all students.

Accommodations are arranged in order of specificity, with those listed first being universal good practice, progressing down the list to accommodations that are more likely to be relevant for neurodivergent individuals or those with a specific disability.

### **1. Space**

1. The student may wish to have the viva in a space which they are familiar with, or to have the opportunity to visit the space before the viva.
2. Ensure that there is a quiet and private space for the student to wait in before and after the viva.
3. Consider the sensory environment. Light, temperature, noise, or visual disturbances can be more of a distraction for some individuals.

### **2. Before the viva**

1. Provide written instructions and clearly explain the process in advance of the viva (e.g., whether to shake hands, how to address the examiners).
2. Offer a practice viva.
3. Consider whether an independent chair might be helpful (e.g., monitor breaks, help to facilitate accommodations).
4. Ensure that the examiners are aware of the student's needs (if agreed with the student), for example, if the student prefers a non-tactile greeting.
5. Allow the student to bring in written notes and a copy of the thesis, and to refer to these as needed.
6. Allow the student to have fidget toys, visual aids, or other props that will help them to perform at their best.

### **3. During the viva**

1. Ensure regular breaks, at least every two hours. Examiners may want to suggest a break if they notice signs of stress or anxiety (e.g. agitation, rambling or the student appears to be talking incessantly or becoming monosyllabic).
2. Ask questions one at a time, in a clear and concise manner. Avoid multi-part questions.
3. Use clear, unambiguous language.
4. Provide different ways for the student to express themselves, e.g. flip chart, white board.
5. Clearly indicate when the viva starts ("The viva is now starting. The first question is...").
6. Indicate at the start of the viva the likely order in which topics will be discussed.
7. Allow extra time for responses to questions, as the student may need more time to process. Repeating questions is not necessary unless requested. Make students aware that they will be given extra time to process questions unless they ask for clarification.
8. Clearly indicate when the candidate has answered a question sufficiently, or re-direct as necessary.

#### 4. After the viva

1. Clearly indicate when the viva is over (e.g., "This is the last question.", "The viva is now over. Please leave the room while we discuss and agree an outcome").
2. Ensure that there is a quiet place for the candidate to wait while the examiners discuss. Allow them to have someone sit with them.
3. Clearly indicate the outcome of the viva. Provide clear verbal feedback and follow up with written feedback. Allow the candidate to record the feedback if desired.
4. Provide constructive comments about the student's performance.
5. Ensure continued access to a quiet space to allow time for processing.

## References

- [How to plan for tailored adjustments in Postgraduate research](#), University College London
- [University reasonable adjustments](#), So, You're Autistic (think you are)?, Dr Chloe Farahar
- Supporting a neurodiverse postgraduate research community, Professor Debbie Riby. Presentation at UKCGE webinar on Supporting Neurodivergent PGRs.
- [Neurodiversity Resource Hub](#), University of Glasgow, School of Cancer Sciences
- Effectively support an autistic PhD student through their Viva, UKCGE conference presentation, Dr Barbara Sandland, Dr Andrea MacLeod, Neil Hall - University of Birmingham

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