

**Guidelines for Research
Degree Disabled
students (including
Specific Learning
Difficulties) and their
Supervisory Team**



Purpose and scope

This Guidance is intended to support disabled students throughout the key stages of their research degree programme. The services available to disabled students is identified and practical advice is provided regarding what supervisors and examiners can do to ensure these students can attain their potential.

The Guidance has been drawn up with reference to good practice available within the University and across the sector. In particular it acknowledges the role of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in seeking to meet the learning requirements of ALL learners whilst paying particular attention to learners who may, for whatever reason, require additional support and guidance in order to progress with their studies. UDL underpins attributes of the UK Council for Graduate Education Supervisory Toolkit, which was launched in 2019. This is a free resource that supervisors can use to explore their own supervisory practice. The University of Worcester Guidance also complements the information about support for disabled research students available on the VITAE website (www.vitae.ac.uk). All staff and students at the University of Worcester can register with VITAE and access this material.

There are an increasing number of students who are declaring a disability and the University of Worcester is adopting a proactive response with development of Guidance for supervisors. The Guidance has been developed collaboratively drawing on consultation between the Research School (RS), the Disability and Dyslexia Service (DDS), the MPhil/PhD and Professional Doctorate Course Leaders (in consultation with Doctoral supervisors in their Academic School) and including voice and experiences shared by a group of research degree students.

This Guidance compliments current Policy, Guidance and support documentation within the University of Worcester including;

- The Course Handbook,
- Policy and Procedures in Inclusive Assessment, Reasonable Adjustments and Alternative Assessment Arrangements for Students with Impairments or Disabilities,
- The Busy Lecturer’s Guide to Inclusive Practice,
- Strategies for Creating Inclusive Programmes of Study (SCIPS) and
- The Inclusion Toolkit.

The Guidance is provided to every doctoral supervisor at the University of Worcester during the mandatory Research Degree Supervisor Development Programme. It is also shared at Refresher Supervisor Training, which must be taken every 3 years. When disabled students are participating in Annual Progress Review (APR) meetings, or are participating in their doctoral viva, the Guidance is also shared with Panels, Expert reviewers, and doctoral examiners.

The Guidance is made available at Research Degree Programme Open Days and sent to all prospective MPhil/PhD and Professional Doctorate students who have disclosed they have a disability. Additionally, the current version is available on both the Research Degree Programme Blackboard pages and the Disability and Dyslexia website.

This Guidance will help Disability Advisors, Research Supervisors and Research Students to devise strategies for support and adjustments in the research context and will inform support plans prepared by the Disability and Dyslexia Service. This document is available in different formats. Please contact the Disability and Dyslexia Service for more details.

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Overview

In the UK, disabled students who are perusing a research degree will undergo an assessment of their requirements and recommended support.

At the University of Worcester, once a student has declared a disability, the Disability and Dyslexia Service (DDS) carry out this assessment. For students who qualify, additional support is funded through the DSA (Disabled students’ Allowances). Students with declared disabilities are encouraged to apply for this support through www.gov.uk/disabled-students-allowances-dsas.

Research degree students are often aware of their needs and the support available to them if this has been provided during their undergraduate and/or taught postgraduate programme. For this reason, it is good practice for supervisors to get to know their students and to engage in meaningful discussions about what works best for them. It is important to recognise however that there are distinct differences between a modular based taught programme and a research degree, comprised almost entirely of independent research. The support available is therefore going to be different and will inevitably change over time as the student progresses through their programme.



Guidance

The Guidance below aims to increase awareness of how to overcome some of the challenges by disabled students through good communication, support and understanding. This will better enable disabled students to realise their potential.

Awareness

Before embarking on an MPhil/PhD or Professional Doctorate at the University of Worcester, it will be helpful for all applicants to identify the differences between doctoral study and undergraduate and taught postgraduate study. What new changes or challenges may be faced? Research Degree Students in the research conducted by VITAE identified differing challenges that included;

- The need for long periods of concentration,
- The need to organise large volumes of material and retrieve relevant information from it as and when needed,
- Long periods of reading or sitting,
- Meeting targets and managing time to include bad days.
- Heightened feelings of isolation, over and above that which any postgraduate researcher may experience.

Reading the University's Code of Practice, Research Degree Regulatory Framework and Research Student Handbook and attending the Research Degree Open Day will help applicants clarify University expectations and postgraduate researcher entitlements. This will help identify the areas which may be problematic for the student and from this they can anticipate and identify strategies for managing and overcoming them. This will help applicants to separate the disability-related factors from others that may influence a final decision.

It is the student's responsibility to register with the Disability and Dyslexia Service (DDS). Pre-entry

students will be sent a registration form on receipt of their application to the University (providing they have declared a disability). This will normally be followed up by a meeting or phone appointment with a Disability Advisor or a joint meeting with the supervisory team (see below).

With the student's permission, DDS will share information about their disability and any general support needs with the student's supervisory team.

A meeting will be arranged with the student and internal supervisors during the early stages of the project. If required, the student and supervisory team must ensure that a follow up meeting takes place to review the student's support needs as the student and project develop. A Disability Advisor may be involved in these meetings if their input is required and capacity allows. Additional meetings will be required around the key stages of the programme, for example Annual Progress Review (APR) and viva.

There are several funding sources available to support disabled students studying in the United Kingdom. The main source of funding is Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA) and we strongly encourage all students with disabilities to apply for support via this route. <http://www.gov.uk/disabled-students-allowances-dsas>

DSA may provide assistive technology, non-medical helper support and specialist equipment all of which can be a major benefit for students.

All supervisors who are supporting a disabled student are advised to attend the Researcher Development workshop 'Supervising Research Degree Students with a Disability'. To book a place on this workshop please do so through the Staff Development Booking Portal.

If an extension to a deadline is required, the RS Manager will notify the Disability and Dyslexia Service Manager to discuss continuation of support. If the project is funded, the RS Manager will notify the funder to ensure the University does not get financially penalised for extension.

Reasonable Adjustments

The Equality Act 2010 states: "disabled students should arrive at university confident that any barriers to their learning have been identified, understood and appropriate steps taken to reduce their impact. The learning environment should be as inclusive as possible, so that individual interventions are the exception, not the rule". Reasonable adjustments are required where disabled staff, students or visitors personally experience substantial disadvantage in comparison with non-disabled people:

- Resources available;
- Cost of the adjustment;
- Practicality of the changes;
- Potential benefit to other students.

For all taught modules, reasonable adjustments are made for disabled students in the same way as they would be for undergraduate students. These might include for example, use of specialist equipment, extra time in written exams / tests, universally inclusive assessment, notes in advance, and recording of taught sessions. The particular adjustments allocated to a student can be found on the class lists for all taught modules. Each student will also be given a Student Support Plan, setting out the adjustments that they are entitled to. This will apply to the taught modules for the PG Certificate in Research Methods and the taught programme of the Professional Doctorate.

For research degree students, where the programme is largely comprised of independent research, it is more difficult to define what is meant by a reasonable adjustment. In most cases, this will be about assessing an individual's needs and putting together some additional support in these areas. It is most likely that reasonable adjustments will need to be made around key events in the programme, most notably the Annual Progress Review and Viva. Some ideas are discussed in the relevant sections below, but it is important to remember that the attributes of a disability are likely to be heightened by stress.

'Extra time' in the context of an MPhil/PhD or the research phase of a Professional Doctorate is more difficult to unpick. The research degree programme at Worcester is already fluid. Our maximum registration periods for all students (4 years full time and 8 years part time) are also generous, when compared to the sector. Experience would suggest that this inbuilt flexibility means that most students do not require 'extra time'. However, in recognition that a student with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs), for example, may take longer to write, structure and edit their thesis, an extension (up to 6 months for a full-time student and up to 12 months for a part time student) to the maximum registration period will usually be granted on these grounds. The only exception to this will be where the university is bound by the requirements of an external funder or where the project is time sensitive. Once extra time has been agreed and added to the student's record, the student will be expected to meet the adjusted deadline date.

Supervision

The following points apply to all research degree students.

All students should receive regular supervision but this will vary depending on the mode of study and the stage of the project. It is good practice to plan the pattern of meetings at the start of each academic year, so the student knows what to expect and is aware of periods when supervisors are unavailable. If meetings are not pre-booked, the date of the next meeting should be arranged at the end of the preceding meeting.

Some disabled students may require more frequent supervisory sessions to enable them to keep track of progress and clarify things with their Supervisor. This need for extra sessions should be met.

A student may benefit from recording supervisory meetings. As doctoral supervision sessions include discussion of confidential and sensitive information, including experimental material, identifiable research data, research data that

may be commercially or politically sensitive and information that relates to third parties, the student will be asked to discuss this with their team beforehand. They will be required to sign a declaration form in relation to how the material can be used and stored, before a meeting is recorded.

All students will benefit from the use of clear language and unambiguous questions.

Larger work goals should be broken down into smaller targets.

Realistic deadlines should be set and agreed in advance.

Initial Supervisory Meetings

In many cases, having already completed one or two degrees, disabled research degree students are able to think and discuss research ideas at a high level but may still struggle with access arrangements or the written element, sorting out and organising their ideas and understanding the language of research. We expect all supervisors to give careful guidance when choosing and initially planning the research project. If a student anticipates that particular research activities will pose difficulties or barriers, talk them through as part of the initial planning process.

During the initial supervisory meetings with a student it is therefore important to establish their specific needs and associated support that they will need in the first 12 months. Ideally the student will have already spoken to a Disability Advisor in DDS but even if not, these conversations are helpful in ensuring a student's needs are met.

Vitae have put together lists of potential questions that supervisors could ask their students during these initial meetings. A version of these (edited and added to by the RS to make them relevant for Worcester) can be found in Appendix 1.

Support with Reading

The University of Worcester has a range of assistive software available on the student networked PCs or for loan from the IT Helpdesk. Please visit the Disability and Dyslexia website <https://www2.worc.ac.uk/disabilityanddyslexia/> for more information.

Students will have to do a lot of reading and supervisors should therefore explore ways to make this more manageable. Vitae have suggested some ways that this might be achieved (see www.vitae.ac.uk):

- Recommend a list of key texts and parts of texts.
- Ask the student to discuss ideas they glean from their reading - are they interpreting the writers accurately?
- If the student disagrees with a writer, are they able to challenge their ideas and formulate their own ideas? negotiate realistic deadlines for reading key texts
- Use DSA funded assistive technology or existing accessibility features of their software to support reading of text.

Support with Academic Writing

The University of Worcester has a range of assistive software available on the student networked PCs or for loan from the IT helpdesk. Please visit the Disability and Dyslexia website <https://www2.worc.ac.uk/disabilityanddyslexia/> for more information.

Academic writing is a skill that all research degree students will need to develop so all students are encouraged to start writing from the very start of their programme and are encouraged to attend the Academic Writing Workshops offered as part of the Researcher Development Programme.

For some students, their disability will create challenges when writing their thesis. Students who have difficulties in writing because they are, for example, pre-lingually deaf (deaf from birth or early infancy before the development of speech) or have dyslexia, are perfectly capable of writing a thesis. However, anxiety about writing can exacerbate the attributes of a disability.

All students can seek support for writing from the University's Writers in Residence.

Some students will benefit from using voice activated software. In these cases it might be useful to give the student a glossary of essential terminology so that they can 'teach' their software key words. A glossary would also be useful for deaf students who are using British Sign Language (BSL). BSL have assigned subject glossaries for engineering, science art and design.

Some students may qualify for Specialist One to One Study Skills support via DSA and this can help them develop their writing and proof reading strategies. Students should contact the Disability and Dyslexia Service (DDS) for more information about this.

Supervisors may be able offer additional support for their student with techniques to help them manage their writing. For example, using 'mind maps', putting ideas onto a Dictaphone and setting up a template/structure for the work.

Supervisors of a student with, for example, a SpLD, need to remember that there may be more spelling, punctuation and grammar mistakes in a student's work (although the student is advised to get drafts of their work proof read before submitting to a supervisor). There may also be 'awkwardness in phrasing' and so supervisors are asked to approach feedback to the student sympathetically in a manner that is professionally informed regarding inclusive practice.

Some students with dyslexia may benefit from having their work proof read before it is given to the supervisory team to identify spelling and

grammatical errors. The University does not provide a proof reading service so this is something that the student would need to arrange externally. Supervisors could consider offering feedback on written work verbally at a tutorial session. Dyslexic students, in particular may find it difficult to decipher written feedback, especially if track changes are used. All feedback should be in clear and unambiguous language.

Annual Progress Review

All MPhil/PhD students and Professional Doctorate students in the thesis stage will have an Annual Progress Review (APR) once a year. APR is a formal, annual review of a student's progress against the requirements of the degree and the student's own programme of research as agreed with the supervisory team. The review is designed: to allow student and supervisors to reflect on progress; to provide assurance to the University that the student's progress is as expected and the programme of research is fit for purpose; to identify any problems or issues that have emerged over the previous 12 months; and to establish an action plan to support the student and supervisory team to get things back on track where progress is not as expected.

As part of the APR the student is asked to provide a reflective review on their progress and significant piece of written work which will vary depending on the stage in the programme. The student may need support with their reading and writing in preparation.

APR happens at specific times in the academic year on or before the anniversary of commencement of study (MPhil/PhD) or the start of the thesis stage (Professional Doctorate). However, for some students, for example students with a specific learning difficulty or mental health difficulties, the team should assess whether the student would benefit from extended deadlines for the submission of written work for APR and a slightly delayed review date. That said, there is a 12 month period between each review point and the work required

for APR will be work that would be expected of any doctoral student at that specific stage of their project. The student therefore has plenty of time to plan and prepare their work between each APR stage.

For most students, APR will be an entirely paper-based exercise, however, following review of the documentation a Course Leader can sometimes refer the student to an APR Panel if there are concerns around progress and/or standard of work.

It is important for a student and supervisor to meet with a Disability Advisor in advance of the Panel meeting to clarify the nature of the difficulties and recommend reasonable adjustments that can be made. The Director of Studies should then alert the panel of the student's disability and associated challenges and appropriate adjustments to be made to the interview. Currently, most APR meetings and Viva voce examinations are being held on Microsoft Teams. A student can however make a case for holding these meetings in person on the grounds of a disability. These adjustments must be made on a case-by-case basis but might include, for example:

- Ensuring the meeting is fully accessible and appropriate space is made available for any specialist equipment (or held on-line if this is easier)
- Allowing the student to see the room in which the interview will take place in advance, and give them the opportunity to ask for an alternative room if appropriate.
- Ensuring the room has sufficient table space for the student to lay out and organise their materials

- Allowing the student 5 minutes at the start of the interview to lay out their materials.
- Allowing the student to use a laptop for easy access to the relevant sections of their work and/or the use of coloured overlays to help them read the relevant text.
- Allowing more time for the interview to take place (the interview is normally 1h).
- Asking the Chair to ensure that the panel understand that they must ensure clear & concise phrasing of questions and instructions and give extra clarification of questions if needed.
- Asking the Chair to ensure that the Panel members remain silent whilst the student finds information or composes a response. Some students may wish to write each question down to avoid memory overload and to give them time to process what they are being asked.

Doctoral Examination by viva voce

The PhD and Professional Doctorate are examined by a written thesis and an oral examination called the viva voce.

Supervisors are urged to arrange a mock viva for all students. The RS has produced some guidance notes around the mock viva and these can be found on the Research Degree Programme Blackboard pages.

It is important for a student and supervisor to meet with a Disability Advisor well in advance of the viva to clarify the nature of the difficulties and recommend reasonable adjustments that can be made. The Director of Studies should then ask the Research School to alert the examiners and Independent Chair of the student's disability and associated possible difficulties so that appropriate adjustments can be made to the Viva. The Viva is currently being held on Microsoft Teams for most students but a case can be made for an in-person via on the grounds of a disability. Adjustments must be made on a case by case basis but might include, for example:

- Work on techniques with the student for signposting significant sections of the thesis. For example, visual clues.
- Work on techniques for managing any additional materials (other than the thesis) taken into the viva.
- With the student's permission, talk to the examiners before the viva if adjustments need to be made in the language used and the way the examiners frame their question and verbal and non verbal communication (e.g. in the case of autism where questions must be in plain English, unambiguous and literal or for a blind student where it is vital to give verbal signs that the answer is complete etc)
- Allowing the student to see the room in which the viva will take place in advance, and give them the opportunity to ask for an alternative room if appropriate.

- Ensuring the meeting is fully accessible and appropriate space is made available for any specialist equipment
- Ensuring the room has sufficient table space for the student to lay out and organise their materials.
- Allowing the student 5 minutes at the start of the viva to lay out their materials.
- Allowing the student to use a laptop for easy access to the relevant sections of the thesis and/or the use of coloured overlays to help them read the relevant text.
- Giving open-ended time limit for viva; allowing plenty of time to find a section, understand the question, reread the text and formulate a considered response. It is essential that the external examiner, who may need to make travel arrangements home, is aware of this in advance.
- Asking the independent chair to ensure that the examiners understand that they must ensure clear & concise phrasing of questions and instructions and give extra clarification of questions if needed.
- Asking the Independent Chair to explain that the examiners need to remain silent whilst the student finds information or composes a response.
- Allowing the student to make brief notes on questions to avoid memory overload.
- Allowance for poor fluency (e.g. word finding, rambling, speed, coherence of response).
- Allowing for rest breaks for fatigue or attention issues. It is the responsibility of the Independent Chair to give the student an opportunity for a break.

Many people know that students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs), such as dyslexia or dyspraxia, often have difficulties with reading and writing but the lesser-known difficulties for such students are their oral fluency, word retrieval and memory; all of which are exacerbated by stress and are more likely to be needed at postgraduate level.

These challenges can also apply to students with mental health difficulties, autism and other hidden disabilities and so equally need to be considered.

Students may not therefore perform to the best of their abilities or express the depth and breadth of their knowledge when 'put on the spot' during supervisory meetings, at Annual Progress Review or oral examination, such as a PhD viva voce.

Appendix 1

Initial Supervisory Meeting

If you are aware that your student has declared a disability before your first supervisory meeting we would suggest that you do some initial research about the disability before meeting the student. Useful information can be found on SCIPS <https://scips.worc.ac.uk/> and Vitae www.vitae.ac.uk

List of potential questions (adapted from Vitae)

- Have you had an appointment with the Disability and Dyslexia Service (DDS) so that you can have a full assessment of your support requirements?
- Do you need to meet your supervisors in a particular space? Is the room accessible, is it well lit and quiet. Does the meeting need to take place at a particular time of day (e.g. a student with ME). Is the student also going to spend a lot of time in a particular workspace, e.g. a lab.
- Do you require assistive software? If so, this is something that must be explored further with DDS but you (the supervisor) need to think about how the student will be supported before this arrives.
- Do you need to record supervisory meetings?
- Will you be working with other people, e.g. in a lab? If so, they need to meet and the student needs to be given an opportunity to explain their

challenges and needs. Is there someone, e.g. one of your other students who could help orientate your new student over the next few months?

- How have you managed your studies before (at UG and/or taught PG level?). What are the particular challenges you face?
- What is the best way for us to provide feedback on your work? What works best for you?
- Research at doctoral level makes a lot of demands on the researcher. How can the supervisor best support you in planning your work?
- You will have to sustain a complex workload over at least 3-4 years (FT) or 5-8 years (PT). How can the supervisory team help you to sustain the management of your workload?
- Would it be helpful for you to see the strategies that other (insert disability) researchers have used? (depending on the disability DDS and the RS may be able to put you in touch with other researchers with the same diagnosis)
- Are there other issues for you around teaching (if applicable) and giving presentations?
- Please will you let us know of new issues or concerns arise in the future.



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