



Guidance for Supervisors on making adjustments to the Viva arrangements for disabled students

It is the legal duty of any education provider to ensure that appropriate reasonable adjustment for students with disabilities and/or specific learning difficulties are in place so that the performance of students during the examination period is not disadvantaged.

In order for reasonable adjustments to be considered, a student must be registered with the Disability & Neurodiversity Service. Recommendations will be forwarded to the Doctoral School DNS Network Member via a Support Agreement.

Viva exam boards may need to consider the following guidelines and inclusive practice:

A student with Specific Learning Difficulties, disabilities and/or mental health conditions in a viva exam might experience difficulties with:

- Remembering what is said
- Holding questions in their mind and then answering after referring to information stored in the long term-memory
- Keeping track of ideas when listening and speaking (multi-tasking)
- Generating full and coherent responses to questions when under pressure.

With this in mind the following guidelines are recommended:

- Provide all written information in an [accessible format](#);
- Ensure clear timetable information and written Viva instructions are provided in a timely way to allow candidates sufficient time to prepare;
- Give advance notification of and access to the venue so the candidate can familiarise themselves with the route and the environment (if on campus). If held online - be sure that the student is comfortable with the technology being used;
- Clearly explain the procedure and method of the examination at the start of the viva;
- Break down information into manageable chunks;
- Allow the use of a whiteboard, mind maps, diagrams, and prompt cards/notes to help the student to present and develop their ideas visually (where viva is in person)
- Provide the opportunity for the student to write down the additional questions asked during the meeting, whilst they are being formulated by the examiners, and to repeat the questions back to ensure understanding;
- Keep questions short and clear;
- Present one question at a time (avoiding multi-faceted questions);

- Where possible (that is, when this does not compromise academic standards), provide extra clarification or early re-direction of questions towards the topic intended;
- Use unambiguous language (where possible, remembering that students should be aware of technical terminology);
- Allow the candidate brief pauses to compose answers;
- Where possible (that is, when this does not compromise academic standards), provide the broad areas of questioning half an hour before the Viva. Being able to consider the questions in advance would reduce the pressure on working memory (which may be experienced by those with a mental health condition or SpLD) and would avoid information overload;
- Allow for poor fluency (e.g. word finding, rambling, irregular speed and flow of response which is due to the learning difficulty or the mental health condition);
- Prior to the Viva discuss with the student their needs and how their disability affects them and agree on the reasonable adjustment/support;
- Provide a clear written summary of any formal feedback, corrections, and action points as part of the examiners' report;
- Monitor fatigue and provide reasonable breaks (e.g. at a minimum every 2 hours) as required.

Adjustments for candidates with Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC)/Asperger Syndrome:

- Where possible, provide an opportunity to meet the examiners beforehand via MS teams/online if there are anxieties about meeting new people; it should be made clear this is not part of the examination and the conversation would not address academic matters but be limited to an introduction to personnel and the likely conduct of the viva;
- Provide a more detailed explanation of the process and structure of a viva in advance, particularly in terms of any social conventions (the candidate may find it helpful to rehearse greetings, requests for clarification of a question, etc.);
- Be aware of the student's particular requirements; for example their need to have adequate personal space (where viva is in person);
- Be aware of sensory overload; for example bright overhead lights, background noises (where viva is in person);
- Direct examiners to avoid the use of metaphorical language, to be prepared to rephrase/ask questions in more explicit concrete terms if the candidate is having difficulty interpreting what is being asked or expressing their knowledge clearly, and encourage them to redirect/prompt the candidate if they stray off topic or have difficulty judging how much information is required;

- Ensure examiners are aware of the potential for unusual behaviour/social communication and greater anxiety than might typically be expected (suggest short breaks if necessary).

Adjustments for candidates with mental health difficulties:

- Awareness of the potential for more severe anxiety than would typically be expected; adopt a calm, understanding approach, and suggest short breaks if necessary;
- Ensure consideration is given to scheduling due to the potential for symptoms/side-effects of medication to be worse at a particular time of day;
- Where possible (with the examiners' agreement) give permission for an appropriate person to attend in a supportive capacity (i.e. moral support, reassurance and support for handling anxiety); it should be made clear that this person is not permitted to participate in the viva by, for example, interpreting the examiners' questions for the candidate.

Adjustments for candidates with a visual impairment:

- Permit the use of assistive technology for reading, writing and note taking;
- Provide written information in an [accessible format](#) (check in advance what the candidate requires);
- The candidate may require a sighted guide or a registered assistance dog; it should be made clear that the guide is not permitted to participate in the viva by, for example, interpreting the examiners' questions for the candidate;
- Give permission for an appropriate person to attend in a supportive capacity; it should be made clear that this person is not permitted to participate in the viva by, for example, interpreting the examiners' questions for the candidate.

Adjustments for candidates with a hearing impairment:

- Facilitate the candidate's use of communication aids – this could include hearing support systems compatible with hearing aids (infra-red/loop systems installed in the room, or portable individual technology) or British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters;
- Ensure any relevant departmental equipment is available/fully operational in advance;
- If required, ensure examiners wear/use a microphone.

Other additional adjustments to be considered may include:

- Provide sufficient table space/time for the student to organise material and get used to the environment;
- Talk through with the student how their personal preparation can be handled: mock viva(s); how they can plan their answers and notate their thesis. How much will this

influence the provision of support on the day? Can some of the barriers be surmounted by thorough preparation?;

- Set in motion practicalities like supporting evidence, accessible rooming, portable loop systems, lighting and arrangement of the furniture; agree who will co-ordinate the arrangements - the Doctoral School, the disability service or yourself as supervisor;
- Notify the internal and external panel members several weeks before the viva of any adjustments and the rationale for the adjustments. Agree with the student the wording of personal details to be passed on to the examiners. The examiners should have an opportunity to raise any concerns.
- On the day check all arrangements to ensure that the venue and the process of the viva are accessible;
- Arrange for a mock viva as standard, which will help the student formulate answers to the questions they may be asked and to gain an experience of the viva format.

Reasonable adjustments for an online transfer of final viva

In order to ensure that online viva process is accessible to students with disabilities and/or specific learning difficulties, the following may need to be considered:

- Previously discuss and agree on the adjustments around the viva;
- The student must be informed well in advance of the software platform to be used for the viva (normally Microsoft Teams). This will provide the opportunity to test the platform, navigation and support arrangements ahead of the viva, and to identify and resolve any issues in advance. Any difficulties should be noted for discussion between Disability and Neurodiversity Services, the student and yourself as the supervisor, to explore solutions and adjustments;
- To ensure that training and support is available for the student so that they have a chance to familiarise themselves with the technology and ensure they are comfortable with the software and the set-up before commencing the viva;
- To consider the use of rest breaks for the duration of the viva. Online meetings may take longer and can be more tiring than face-to-face meetings. It might be necessary to agree pre-arranged break times (e.g. 10 minutes every hour) and/or to have breaks available on request;
- It might help to provide familiarity with those involved in the viva before via (for example) recent photographs or informal pre-viva video introductions to those involved, or blurring the background on the call.

Supervisors and Independent Chairs

The Independent Chair will be responsible for ensuring any specific agreed adjustments are adhered to during the viva examination, and the supervisor for ensuring all pre-viva recommendations have been followed. It is important that both are aware of any adjustments prior to the viva examination. The Doctoral School will share any specific agreements with all members of the examining team once these have been disclosed and consented to by the student.

For further support or guidance, please contact Disability and Neurodiversity Services at disability-dyslexia@rhul.ac.uk