

Guidelines for staff supporting disabled Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs)

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1. Introduction

The University of Aberdeen strives to create an inclusive environment for study which recognises and supports the whole student population. Our proactive approach to embedding and mainstreaming the principles of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion is underpinned by the University's strategic plan, Aberdeen 2040.

In our increasingly diverse postgraduate researcher (PGR) community, we recognise every PhD and PhD journey is unique. Through our inclusive practices we strive to ensure all aspects of University life are accessible for each individual to achieve their full potential.

This document provides guidance on the roles and responsibilities of PGR supervisors, Schools, and others involved in supporting disabled PGRs' to effectively conduct their research and complete assessments, including the *viva voce*. Guidance for disabled PGRs can be found in the University's [Academic Quality Handbook](#).

This document should be read in conjunction with the [University's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy](#). The University adopts the Equality Act 2010 definition of a disability which is "a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' adverse effect on a person's ability to carry out normal daily activities". The [University's Student Advice & Support webpages](#) should be referred to for further information.

2. Key Contacts and Responsibilities

2.1 Role of the Postgraduate Researcher

PGRs should contact [Student Advice & Support](#) as early as possible to arrange disability-related support for their research degree. PGRs are encouraged to share that they are disabled and/or provide information about their required support provisions with their supervisor(s). This will help ensure appropriate and timely support is provided throughout the PhD project. PGRs can be assured that any information will be treated positively and confidentially and will not be shared without the student's permission. This includes to supervisors, examiners, sponsors, and funders. If a PGR chooses not to share, this may limit the support that can be put in place.

All new PGRs are provided with information about the support available at the University for disabled students and how to access this. If a PGR shares they are disabled on their application, they will receive information via email on the study-related support available and how to access this through Student Advice & Support prior to registration.

PGRs should make themselves aware of the requirements for key [progression assessments](#) and final examination of a research degree by consulting the [Postgraduate Degree Regulations](#) and by engaging with their supervisory team. If a PGR considers that there are any changes required to the provisions in place for their assessments and viva, it is the PGR's responsibility to make their supervisory team and Student Advice & Support aware, so that a review of the provisions can be completed.

If a PGR feels that their provisions are not being effectively delivered by the School, they can raise this with the relevant School Disability Coordinator(s) (SDCs).

2.2 School Disability Coordinator (SDC)

Schools and Departments have identified members of staff as Disability Coordinators who Student Advice & Support work closely with to ensure that students' provisions are implemented within the Academic Schools. The SDCs have expert knowledge of the School's subject area, student processes and other activities such as field trips and placements. The role of SDCs in supporting PGRs is to communicate any provisions implemented by Student Advice & Support to the relevant members of staff (including supervisors) within the School.

The SDCs will work with supervisors to provide guidance on how provisions can be implemented into the research project.

An SDC should also be contacted by the PGR student ahead of fieldwork, where provisions are required and in situations where a PGR feels that their provisions are not being effectively delivered by the School. Please see the following link for the SDCs' contact details: [School Disability Coordinator contact details](#).

2.3 Supervisors

In addition to providing research guidance, one of the key roles of a PGR supervisor is to support a PGR to reach their full potential through the creation of an inclusive research environment.

Supervisors will use their regular supervisory meetings to discuss with PGRs any new support required and review any provisions already in place. Supervisors can contact the SDC at any point for support on implementing provisions or guidance on how processes can be appropriately adjusted to support disabled PGR students. The SDC can also be contacted by the supervisor if any concerns arise or to arrange a follow-up discussion or review on provisions. The SDC may recommend a further meeting with Student Advice & Support, the PGR, the PGR Coordinator and/or PGR School.

Prior to a PGR starting, supervisors should:

- Check, and discuss, with their [School Disability coordinator](#) (SDC) any provisions that should be in place

On arrival of a PGR, supervisors should:

- Meet with all PGRs and discuss any disability-related provisions as part of the '[initial meeting checklist](#)'.
- If a PGR shares, at any point of their PhD, with their supervisor that they are disabled, the supervisor should contact their [SDC](#). If the PGR requires support in their programme for disability-related reasons, the PGR will be encouraged to [engage](#) with Student Advice & Support.

On receipt of a PGR's disability provisions report from a SDC, the supervisor should:

- Arrange a meeting with the SDC (if not already done so) to discuss implementation of provisions.
- Arrange a meeting with their PGR to discuss implementation of provisions to support the research project and/or key assessments and/or final examination.
- Once provisions are in place, they should be discussed regularly at supervisory meetings to ensure that the support is effective. If changes are required, the PGR should contact Student Advice & Support to arrange a provisions review.

2.4 Student Advice & Support

Student Advice & Support provide advice, information, and practical study-related support to all disabled students. When a PGR contacts Student Advice & Support, an initial discussion and assessment of study-related needs will be arranged. Student Advice & Support will provide advice, and recommend provisions appropriate to the individual and their PGR degree. Although provisions may be unique to a PGR, and their specific research project, a general guide to provisions is available at [Disability Services | Students | The University of Aberdeen \(abdn.ac.uk\)](https://www.abdn.ac.uk/disability-services/students/).

Provisions will be recorded on the student record system and communicated to the supervisory team via the SDCs. If any of the provisions require discussion, the supervisor should raise this with the student, Student Advice & Support and the SDC.

It should be noted, Student Advice & Support do not routinely share the nature of a student's disability with supervisors and support staff unless it is essential for the provision of the required support and/or the student has agreed that this information should be shared.

3. Support for Disabled PGR Students

3.1 Financial Support

For eligible PGRs, Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) covers the cost of study-related support required for disability-related reasons. PGRs should discuss options for DSA with Student Advice & Support in the first instance. For PGRs who are eligible, Student Advice & Support may assist them to apply to their funding body for DSA.

PGRs who have been recruited to UK Research and Innovation studentships are eligible to apply for DSA. More information on this can be found in the [UKRI framework Document for Disabled Students' Allowances](#).

DSA may also be available to students who have not been recruited to UKRI studentships, who are ordinarily resident in the UK from funding bodies such as the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS), Student Finance England (SFE), Student Finance Wales (SFW) and Student Finance Northern Ireland (SFNI).

Whilst DSA is being processed, Student Advice & Support will make interim arrangements to ensure provisions are in place as soon as possible.

For disabled PGRs who are not eligible for DSA, the University will fund any agreed reasonable adjustments which have an associated cost.

Please refer to this factsheet for further information on the DSA process.

3.2 Provisions

Provisions can support PGRs to navigate the demands of a research degree and will be put in place following the initial assessment, or follow up meetings, with Student Advice & Support and after consideration of medical and/or Specific learning difference (SpLD) evidence. The following link provides information about the evidence required in order for provisions to be implemented long-term at the University: [Disability Services | Students | The University of Aberdeen \(abdn.ac.uk\)](#).

3.3 Specialist Mentor Support

Specialist Mentors support PGRs with mental health conditions, Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC) and/or AD(H)D. They work collaboratively to ensure the development of appropriate skills and strategies to support self-help and self-management to develop and maintain study patterns, goal setting, and improved motivation in a research setting.

3.4 Accessible venues

Due to the nature of our campus, not all facilities are accessible. If a meeting room, lab, or research office is in a room that is unsuitable, PGRs should contact the meeting organiser and/or the relevant SDC(s) as soon as possible so that alternative accessible venues can be explored. Student Advice & Support can note on a student's record that they require to attend accessible rooms on campus.

Where required, a Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan (PEEP) and personalised risk assessments (for lab facilities/procedures) will be discussed and actioned as appropriate. PEEPs are coordinated by the Health, Safety & Resilience Team and risk assessments are coordinated by the supervisor (as part of the initial workplace assessment). Student Advice & Support will link students with the Health, Safety & Resilience Team to create a PEEP.

Information on the accessibility of the campus is available at: [University of Aberdeen | AccessAble](#).

3.5 Academic Writing

All PGRs can access support with writing through the Student Learning Service and disabled PGRs may be referred for specialist study skills support coordinated by Student Advice & Support.

If identified as a reasonable adjustment with Student Advice & Support, PGRs may receive access to proof reading support which sits out with the University's [Policy on Proofreading](#). Where there is a confidentiality agreement or IP contract in place, this must be disclosed by the PGR to Student Advice & Support who will coordinate the proof-reading support with the SDCs.

It is important that supervisors recognise there may be more spelling/grammatical/phrasing errors where PGRs have a SpLD and should approach feedback sympathetically. Where proof-reading is a listed provision, supervisors should provide additional guidance and feedback on spelling where a student is using terminology related to the research field.

3.6 Fieldwork

Many PGRs will undertake fieldwork as part of their research project and as with research projects, all fieldwork experiences are unique. Provisions to support fieldwork will be highly project specific and informed by any ethical requirements and risk assessments. Any provisions must be agreed in advance of any fieldwork activity with the supervisory team, the PGR and the SDC(s). Student Advice & Support may also be consulted on adjustments for fieldwork.

3.7 PGR Assessment

Within the PhD, there are formal assessment exercises that are essential for academic progression:

- An annual assessment of academic progress, often referred to as the [Annual Progression Exercise \(APE\)](#).
- The final oral examination or [viva voce](#) after submission of the thesis.

The PGR should arrange a meeting with Student Advice & Support and/or the Supervisory Team to discuss provisions ahead of assessments if these have not already been agreed. With the PGR's consent, the examiners can be made aware of the nature of the PGR's disability and associated provisions, for question formation/structure within the viva. The same academic standards/core competencies for the progression through, and the award of the research degree, must be upheld.

Provisions for assessment and examination will need to reflect individual circumstances and the format of the examination, noting that the viva may be conducted online. Some provisions may require additional approval from Registry or the Dean for PGR, this is indicated in the [provisions guidance document](#).

It should be noted the deadline for the Annual Progression Exercise 1 **cannot be moved** and therefore any additional time required needs to be granted through earlier awareness of the deadline rather than by extending beyond the 12 months. Discussions about timescales and expectations of work required for assessment should take place within the **first month** from the PGR's start date, which will be no later than 6 months prior to the work submission date. This should be raised by the PGR as part of the Supervisory Team meeting.

3.8 General PGR support

The [Postgraduate Research School](#) support all PGRs on their research journey through:

- Development, implementation, and advice on institutional policies, processes, and guidance to support postgraduate research and researchers.
- Student and supervisor development and skills training.
- Advice on PGR stipends (including sick pay).
- Advice and processing changes to PGR study (e.g., absences including suspensions, extensions).
- General support for PGRs and supervisors.

The Postgraduate Research School work closely with teams across the University including Registry, Student Advice & Support and the Experience, Engagement & Wellbeing team, to ensure all PGRs are supported to reach their potential. They are often the first point of contact for PGRs and supervisors for general PGR support and queries.

[Postgraduate Coordinators](#) oversee formal School progression exercises and provide pastoral advice for PGRs supervisors within each School. Postgraduate Coordinators work closely with the Postgraduate Research School.

4. Training for Supervisors

Student Advice & Support can be contacted for information and advice on how to support PGRs in their PhD programme. The PGR School host training on how to support PGRs, including sessions on how to support neurodivergent PGRs and Autism Awareness sessions. If you feel you or your School would benefit from additional training, please contact pgrs-engagement@abdn.ac.uk to discuss this further.

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