



University of  
St Andrews

# Academic adjustments guidance document: reasonable adjustments for postgraduate research students

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<b>Purpose</b>	This guidance provides clarification for School staff on the various reasonable adjustments for PGR students that may be specified in disabled students' support plans. The guidance also provides considerations and types of adjustments which may be included.

<b>Version number</b>	<b>Purpose / changes</b>	<b>Document status</b>	<b>Author of changes, role and school / unit</b>	<b>Date</b>
1.2	Addition of information and weblinks to support students with disabilities.	Updated	Deputy Head of Education Policy and Quality (ESE)	27/08/2025

# UNIVERSITY OF ST ANDREWS

## ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENTS:

### GUIDANCE ON REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS FOR POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH STUDENTS

#### Introduction

The following sets out information regarding teaching, learning, and assessment specific to postgraduate research students to ensure that reasonable adjustments are provided while upholding the required academic standards for their degree. It should be read in conjunction with the [Academic Adjustments for Disabled Students Policy](#) and the associated [Guidance for Students](#) and [Guidance for Staff](#).

Reasonable adjustments for students will be identified on a case-by-case basis and will consider all relevant information which the University is aware of, which may include medical evidence, diagnostic report and individual needs assessment. A Disability Adviser from Student Services will discuss with the student what information should be included in a Support Plan.

If the student holds a student visa and the Support Plan includes a proposal to implement adjustments to the student's in-person attendance, the planning process must include consultation with the Student Immigration Compliance Team to ensure that the agreed Support Plan allows the student to remain compliant with the conditions of their visa. (This is not required for an online viva.)

The Quality Assurance Agency's [Doctoral Degree Characteristics Statement](#) sets out sector-wide expectations of the attributes expected of all doctoral graduates, that there be 'some form of regular progress review', and that the final assessment, comprised of a thesis and oral examination together, 'provides evidence of the equivalence of standards across different UK doctorates, as all doctoral candidates face similar intellectual challenges at the point of final examination'. Sector-wide expectations are also set out in the QAA's [descriptors for qualifications](#) at FHEQ level 7 / SCQF level 11 (Masters degrees, including research masters degrees) and at FHEQ level 8 / SCQF level 12 (Doctoral degrees).

Within St Andrews, the policies on [Progress Review and Termination of Studies for Postgraduate Research Students](#) and on [Assessment of Postgraduate Research Students](#) set out the purposes of the review process and of the viva.

It is important that the need for reasonable adjustments is identified well in advance, in particular regarding progress reviews and vivas. As outlined in section 5 ('Responsibilities of research students') in the [Supervision of postgraduate research students](#) policy, PGR students are recommended to initiate discussion with Student Services at least two months in advance of their review or viva taking place. Failure to submit a request for an adjustment within a reasonable timescale may result in the progress review or viva being re-scheduled.

Some postgraduate research students engage in taught modules as part of or alongside their degree and therefore may also require adjustments in line with those for taught students.

It is important to note that where a student is on a research degree programme which is delivered collaboratively with another institution, reasonable adjustments may need to be agreed with the partner. In such cases, adjustments may be different or tailored to the context of the programme and the partnership and should be considered at the earliest opportunity.

### Commonly considered areas in Support Plans for PGR students

The following provides an indicative list of areas of PGR learning and teaching that the Disability Team and PGR students may consider. This list is not exhaustive, and reasonable adjustments will be identified on a case-by-case basis. Following disclosure of the disability, the Disability Team will identify the adjustments required in the student's Support Plan, although supervisors and students may wish to refer to the list in the usual course of discussing the student's studies.

Considerations:	What may be included:
Accessibility	Physical: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building accessibility for office space and labs</li> <li>• Access to supervisor's office</li> <li>• School events</li> <li>• Conferences</li> <li>• Fieldwork</li> </ul> Digital: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Software</li> <li>• Captioning</li> <li>• Accessibility of emails and information shared</li> <li>• Documents/sources (alternative formats e.g. large print, Braille, audio, digital or electronic formats such as PDFs)</li> </ul>
Learning support (adjustments specifically provided by the Disability Team)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extended library loans</li> <li>• Print credits</li> <li>• DSA support (details on NMPH, equipment and software provided)</li> <li>• Other personal assistants</li> </ul>
Working pattern/schedule	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Office</li> <li>• Home</li> <li>• Hybrid</li> <li>• Flexibility with start/end times</li> <li>• Breaks</li> </ul>
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Styles and preferences</li> <li>• In person</li> <li>• Online</li> <li>• Email</li> <li>• Group meetings</li> <li>• Processing time</li> <li>• Presentations and public speaking</li> <li>• Networking at events and conferences</li> </ul>
Sharing information and feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Verbally, written or both</li> <li>• Via meetings – agenda, notes</li> <li>• Advanced warning/agreed timelines</li> </ul>
Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equipment</li> <li>• Sensory considerations within workspaces               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Light</li> <li>• Sound</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Smell</li> <li>• Temperature</li> <li>• Touch</li> <li>• Physical space</li> </ul>
Planning and deadlines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May require flexibility (requests for an extension that will change the end date of studies must be made via MMS and approved by the School and the Associate Provost (Students))</li> <li>• Support with structure and planning</li> <li>• Agreed timescales</li> </ul>
Assessment and reviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Progress reviews</li> <li>• Viva</li> </ul>
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan (PEEP)</li> <li>• Transitions</li> <li>• Managing change and unexpected events</li> </ul>

Where a PGR student requires an adjustment for a taught module, this should also appear in their Support Plan on MMS.

### **Adjustments relating to progress reviews**

Schools should refer to the requirements set out in the Progress Review Policy and consider where any School-specific provisions may require adjustment. For example, where a School requires PGRs to give an oral presentation to a group, adjustments may be required for PGRs with particular disabilities, similar to those a taught student would need in such a scenario.

Where an adjustment is needed to the interview element of the progress review, Schools should refer to the guidance provided below on types of adjustment for the viva. Where an adjustment similar to those for an alternative format viva is required, the DoPGR should consult with the Associate Provost Students. Progress reviewers are responsible for implementing the adjustments 'on the day'.

### **Adjustments relating to the viva**

Adjustments required for the viva should be identified in the student's Support Plan and passed to the convenor of the examining committee through MMS. Examiners may seek further information or guidance from the Disability Team and have an opportunity to raise any concerns. The convenor of the examining committee is responsible for monitoring the implementation of the individual reasonable adjustments and may seek assistance with any technical set up required (which should be tested in advance of the actual assessment).

Some adjustments may require significant changes to the usual viva format. In such cases, the process for requesting an alternative format viva should be followed to ensure that the student is not disadvantaged while maintaining required academic standards.

Convenors should note that they are required to ensure that reasonable adjustments are implemented. Where they need to convey information to the external examiner in order to fulfil this, this should be about the adjustments needed (not the disability the student has).

In many cases, it may be helpful for a supervisor of a PhD student to organise a mock viva to simulate examination conditions. This practice session will help to identify whether inclusive practices are sufficient to address disability-related concerns or whether individual reasonable adjustments will be required to alleviate the substantial disadvantage which a disabled student

would otherwise experience. Where an alternative format viva is needed, the Associate Provost (Students) may require such a mock viva to be held.

Examples of adjustments that may be included in a Support Plan and do not require an alternative format viva would be:

- Timing (am/pm)
- Consideration of mode (online or in person)
- Rest breaks
- Permission to bring in food/drink
- A candidate needing to monitor a condition (e.g. checking blood sugars) or take medication
- Specialist ergonomic chair required

### **Alternative format viva**

Live synchronous assessment is a core requirement of a viva and cannot be dispensed with. However, when a student and the Disability team identify that commonly used adjustments would be insufficient to overcome substantial disadvantage, an alternative format viva may be requested.

This would include scenarios in which:

- The student types responses rather than participating orally.
- The student participates in an online viva with their camera switched off, either for the duration or periodically to focus on their thinking /processing.
- A supporter/support worker/note taker is present.
- A BSL interpreter is present.
- A specialist mentor to assist communication is present.
- Assistive technology is used.
- Rest breaks are needed such that the viva process will extend over more than one day.

Details of the adjustments required should be submitted for approval to the Associate Provost (Students) in line with the timescales set out above. The student should ensure that they meet with a Disability Adviser to discuss their adjustments in good time, so that the Disability Team can liaise with academic staff within the timescales set out above.

In such cases, the Associate Provost (Students) may require provisions such as:

- A convenor who is not acting as internal examiner.
- Any or all of the candidate, convenor, and examiners to receive a briefing from the Disability Team.
- Holding of a mock viva or vivas.
- A colleague from ITS to be present in case of technical issues.
- A support person who can see and hear/talk to the candidate when the examiners are only interacting with them in writing.
- Setting of expectations about the 'processing time' between a question being given (orally or in writing) and an answer being provided (orally or in writing).
- Setting of expectations for the quantity of text that should be provided for each question.

Once approved by the Associate Provost (Students), the adjustments will be logged on the support plan as usual.

At first examination, a viva can only be waived in exceptional cases and with the express permission of the Provost.

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1.1	Separate guidance on 'Reasonable Adjustments for postgraduate research students' issued. Related to updated amendments to the 'Policy on academic adjustments for disabled students guidance for students'	Updated	Deputy Head of Education Policy and Quality (Education and Student Experience)	January 2025
1.2	Addition of information to support students with disabilities.	Updated	Deputy Head of Education Policy and Quality (Education and Student Experience)	27/08/2025