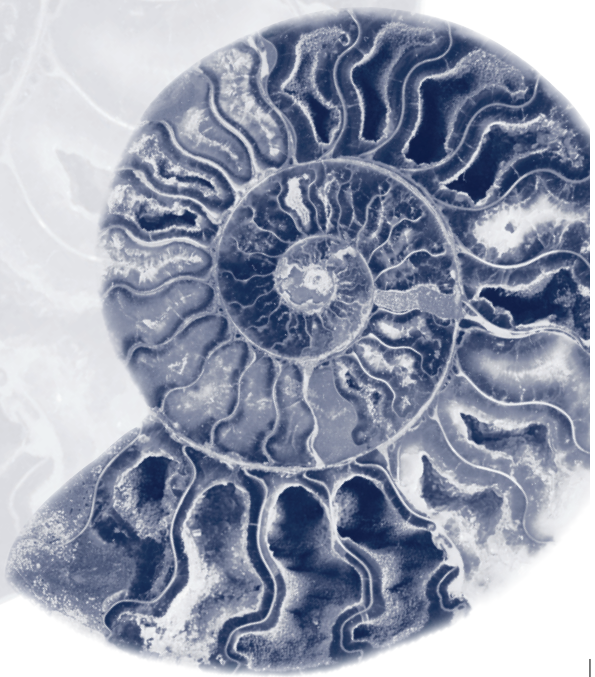
Society for Research into Higher Education

Supervising Disabled Research Students

Val Farrar & Richard Young
Editor: Pam Denicolo

Issues in Postgraduate Education: Management, Teaching and Supervision



A Series of Consultative Guides produced by the Postgraduate Issues Network of the Society for Research into Higher Education

Series Two | Number Three

Society for Research into Higher Education

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Foreword to the series

The SRHE Postgraduate Guides have proven a very popular series and meet a growing demand for advice and guidance on the practical issues involved in the management, teaching and supervision of postgraduates who come from a wide variety of disciplines and backgrounds often with widely different needs.

This new series of the Postgraduate Guides, launched in 2007, contains a number of new titles as well as some revisions of the most popular guides from the first series.

As with the first series the aim has been to produce clear practical guides, devoid of jargon, intended as a useful set of tools that will help deliver and support the delivery of high quality postgraduate training.

The guides are developed by the SRHE Postgraduate Issues Network. The executive team responsible for conceiving and directing this new series is led by Pam Denicolo and comprises: Alistair McCulloch, Martin Gough and Helen Perkins, Director of SRHE.

The SRHE Postgraduate Issues Network

The Postgraduate Issues Network was set up in January 1995 to help its members find out about new developments in the field of postgraduate education and to interpret these for their own use and benefit. In particular the network is concerned with: financial issues, quality issues, issues of good practice, issues specific to and independent of discipline and issues relating to employment. The network has more than a hundred members, including a number in the USA, Canada, Australia and Hong Kong, and it continues to grow.

The network offers its members much more than a series of meetings: it aims to be a true network of mutual support. It does this by:

- providing speakers at meetings to focus on a topic of general or topical interest
- ensuring that there is the opportunity for members to raise their own issues to discuss in or after meetings
- circulating material from members between meetings, and
- stimulating informal support and collaboration outside meetings.

Helen Perkins
Director
Society for Research into
Higher Education

Pam Denicolo
Alistair McCulloch
Martin Gough
Richard Race
Convenors
Postgraduate Issues Network

Editorial Board

Foreword

This is a publication that you don't know you need until you read it. It opened my eyes to the unconscious barriers that we create for disabled, and to some extent non-disabled, doctoral researchers within the academic community. I recommend all supervisors and people supporting researchers to read it and reflect on their behaviours and the environment in which they work.

This very practical Guide takes you to the heart of the issue. It is written from the researcher perspective, using actual case histories encountered by the authors during their HEFCE-funded Premia project to improve provision for disabled postgraduate researchers. The Guide takes you through each stage of the PhD research degree by asking practical questions. If you are working with a disabled researcher it will give you the understanding and the confidence to ensure that you can respond to their needs. If you are working with non-disabled researchers it will also give you food for thought: inclusive practice is good for all.

You will find comprehensive web-based resources from the Premia project for both supervisors and students at: www.premia.ac.uk.

Dr Janet Metcalfe
Director, UK GRAD Programme

Preface

From the early 1990s until 2005, HEFCE (The Higher Education Funding Council for England) funded projects to improve provision for disabled students in higher education. In the final round of disability-related projects, a team at Newcastle University proposed that it look at the barriers and issues for disabled postgraduate research students and their transition into work. When we started the Premia project, no-one knew what issues would be identified, though we suspected that they would be different from those at undergraduate level. Indeed we wondered at the outset quite what the work would look like.

Over three years we explored national and international best practice, talked with supervisors, research managers, administrators, examiners, disability advisers and careers personnel, mapped the research life cycle, conducted interviews with disabled research students across the UK, analysed the findings and embarked on the writing of staff development resources and materials for disabled researchers to address the concerns of the students.

Students said that their experience as disabled researchers was significantly different from their lives as disabled undergraduates. The issues were numerous and diverse. But they all identified as most significant to their own fulfilment and success the relationship between supervisor(s) and student.

It is not always the case that the voice of students is heard when we present the findings of our research. But the students' stories were powerful illustrations of the issues and the students are often the most incisive advocates for change. In this Guide we have tried to let the student voice be heard, even when it challenges some of our long-held precepts.

The contents of this Guide are offered to its readers not as an expert view of how to supervise disabled students. The students themselves would say that this aim would be simplistic and unrealistic. Each student is unique and we should respond to their individuality. Its purpose is to highlight ways in which we may, without thinking, construct barriers. The suggestions are there to encourage us to reflect on our practices, our policies and our attitudes. We hope that you will contact us with your ideas, alternative approaches and examples of good practice which we can incorporate into the next edition.

We need the most talented researchers. We cannot afford to exclude the gifts of potential researchers because of the barriers which we may perceive to their success. That is why we were committed to the Premia project and why we would like this Guide to be widely read. We wrote it in the context of the UK higher education system. However, much of what is here will be strongly relevant in other contexts.

Acknowledgements

Our thanks are first and foremost to all the students across the UK without whose enthusiasm and generosity in terms of time and honesty the Premia project would have remained a theoretical exercise. Then to the other project team members – Penny Warin, project officer for the careers elements, Dr Stan Taylor, Durham University, Sandra Chilton, Head of the Disability Service at Newcastle University who identified the need for the project and Alan Brice, all project directors; to Dr Jo Whaley who reviewed all the resources we wrote; to the Advisory Group who gave us invaluable perspectives and expertise – Professor Ella Richie, Pro-Vice-Chancellor Teaching and Learning at Newcastle University and Professor Madeleine Atkins, now Vice-Chancellor of Coventry University, Professor Alan Hurst, University of Central Lancashire and SKILL, Nick Keeley, Director of the Careers Service at Newcastle University, Professor Pam Denicolo, UKCGE and University of Reading, Professor Miriam David, ESRC and the UKCGE, Dr Stephen Macdonald, Sunderland University, and Alan Harrison (BBSRC); to Carol Wilson of the National Disability Team; to Dr Rebecca Mallett of University of Sheffield who from a distance kept the project co-ordinator afloat with reflections and humour; and to Dr Tom Shakespeare, a creative and encouraging friend of the project.

About the authors

Val Farrar is a project officer at Durham and Newcastle Universities. She has worked for over thirty years as a teacher, adviser and researcher in the secondary, further, community and higher education sectors, mainly with disabled students and those with learning difficulties. She has managed two sector-wide projects in universities to improve provision for disabled students and is committed to research-based staff development.

Dr Richard Young is Professional Development Advisor in the academic staff development team at Newcastle University. He co-directed the Premia project and is programme director of the Newcastle Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice. He has interests in holistic and research-based staff development, reflective practice and assessment.

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Contents

1 Great expectations

Within research education there is implicitly a culture of independent learning; it is the essence of research. The research student therefore has to be, or seek to become, a self-directed traveller. There is a level of support and guidance which is acceptable to those who supervise and support research students on their journey. To go beyond that level of support can lead to concerns about the erosion of academic standards and the competence of the learner.

A disabled research student may challenge those assumptions. The intensive reading essential to research may prove a formidable activity for those students with physical impairments where pain demands frequent changes of posture. Extended writing may present obstacles to Deaf students whose first language is BSL (British Sign Language)[1]. The complex planning and organisation demanded by doctoral study may seem daunting to a student who experiences difficulties with logical thinking, short-term memory loss or low energy levels. A minimalist style of supervision can be a very real barrier to the progress of, for example, a blind doctoral candidate or a student with mental health difficulties. The imagery of academic discourse used in a viva may confuse a candidate with Asperger's syndrome.

As Taylor and Beasley stated in 2005:[2]

> Historically (...) doctoral supervision has been based upon the assumption that, by virtue of having made it onto a doctoral programme, candidates would necessarily have the confidence to cope with its academic and social demands. This assumption was arguably always dubious, as demonstrated by high non-completion rates and long completion times two decades ago when the candidate population was highly elitist. But it is even more so in the context of a diverse population...

Differentiation

A supervisor will usually differentiate between the varied needs presented by their doctoral students and will make often instinctive adjustments to support the learning of those students. So the challenge presented by a disabled student becomes another opportunity for creative and shared problem solving rather than a threat to research excellence. The challenge is shared not only with the student, but within the supervisory team – particularly so in the joint supervision arrangements now required by the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Code of Practice and increasingly in international models of supervision.

[1] The term 'Deaf' with a capital 'D' is used to mean those who use British Sign Language (BSL) as their first language and who are members of the Deaf Community. We use the term 'deaf' with a lower case 'd' to mean those people who have a hearing loss but whose first language is not BSL. The term d/Deaf is used here as a generic term for Deaf, deafened and hard of hearing.

[2] Taylor, S. and Beasley, N. (2005) *A Handbook for Doctoral Supervisors* London: Routledge.

If we want to find supervisory strategies which will achieve parity, we need to ask some fundamental questions.

- How will this student be able to reach their goal?
- What actions or shifts in supervisory practice will enable the student to complete?
- How can we ensure that our actions do not disable a candidate?

Those are questions which are crucial to the success of all students, disabled and non-disabled. Inclusive practice is good practice for all. As one supervisor working with a dyslexic PhD candidate said,[3]

> **If he needs to be coached and supported to get to the place he wants to get to, then that's part of being what a supervisor is and it's a commitment that you take on. Every student is different. Other students have childcare issues or whatever, and he has issues (...) with confidence and with particular communications.**

Are there solutions?

There are no absolutes or definitive actions which will be appropriate and effective for all disabled students. For example, three dyslexic PhD candidates may present diverse requirements. One may have short-term memory difficulties which would make the viva very challenging. Another may find writing the thesis the main obstacle to progress. The third may have organisational difficulties and three years' research planning may seem an insurmountable hurdle. Their support requirements will be very different. But what all students require of a supervisor is an understanding of their learning styles, of where they are likely to encounter problems, and ways in which their supervisors can enable them to harness their abilities within their research.

> **..having made the mental acceptance that this is a good student but an unconventional one, then the rest seems to be, 'Right, how do we get through this and around this and enable him to achieve his potential?**
> Research supervisor

In this Guide we will explore the concept of inclusive practice, the extent and nature of some of the issues which disabled graduates face when they embark on postgraduate study, and give some practical guidance on addressing those issues, particularly in research supervision. All the issues were identified by disabled research students during the research phase of the Premia project at Newcastle University to improve provision for disabled postgraduate research students.[4] The students' and supervisors' words which we quote are verbatim extracts from their interviews, questionnaire responses or personal histories written by disabled research students.

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[3] All quotations in bold type are by participants in the Premia project (Postgraduate Research Education: Making It Accessible).

[4] 31 disabled postgraduate research students and doctoral graduates from 12 UK universities were contacted and agreed to complete questionnaires, be interviewed and/or to write personal accounts.

2 Contexts and frameworks

Inclusive practice

Best inclusive practice takes account of the whole of a student's life and views the curriculum as what happens within and beyond the setting for formal learning. It involves the whole organisation, not one part of it. In 1994 Mason and Reiser[5] argued that inclusion is a method that

> fundamentally challenges the traditional approach which regards impairment and disabled people as marginal, or an 'afterthought', instead of recognising that impairment and disablement are a common experience of humanity, and should be a central issue in the planning and delivery of a human service such as education.

Within the context of research education, it needs to permeate the infrastructure: our planning, recruitment, communication, administration, research management, staff and skills development, research supervision, feedback and assessment. As the DRC (Disability Rights Commission) states in its leaflet to explain the Disability Equality Duty (December 2006),[6]

> It's all about weaving equality for all, including disabled people, into your culture in practical and demonstrated ways.

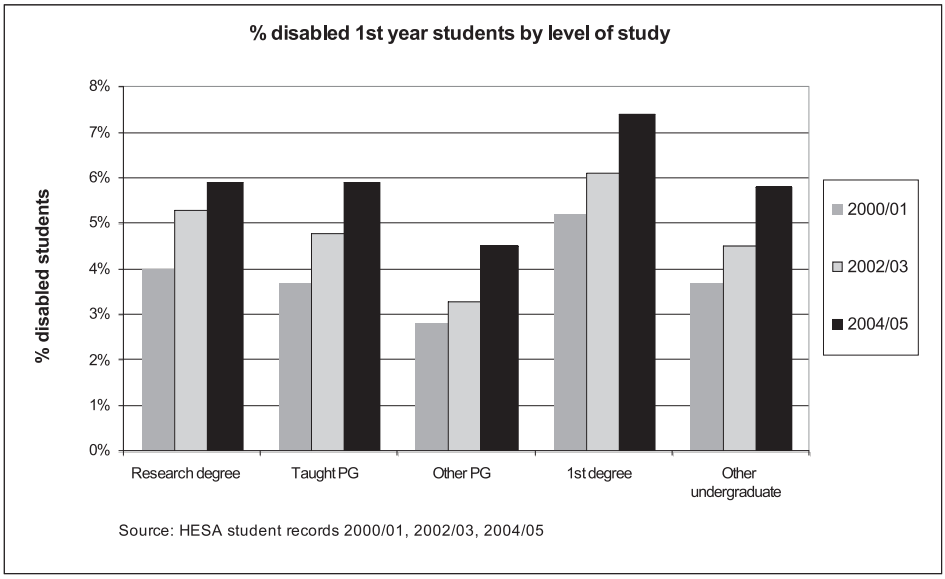
As we define some of the issues around research and disability, we will also look at how we might 'weave equality' into the fabric of our work.

What proportion of research students are disabled?

It can be difficult to engage with disability issues until they become personally relevant – when we meet and work with individual disabled students. Until 2000, only a small proportion of students on research degree programmes were disabled. Over the following four years the numbers grew as higher education became more accessible and institutions more confident in their response to disabled students.

[5] Mason M. and Reiser R. (1994). *Altogether Better*. Comic Relief, UK.

[6] For a range of information about the Disability Equality Duty and other relevant legislation, go to the DRC website: www.drc-gb.org



In 2004/5 for the first time over 7% of UK students starting first degrees were disabled. The number of disabled postgraduate students has risen proportionately. Add to those numbers the postgraduates who do not disclose their disability; others who seek central support but do not reveal their disability to academic staff; some who become disabled during their postgraduate study. It becomes increasingly likely that most supervisors will encounter disabled students in the future. Those supervisors and support staff have a responsibility to anticipate the requirements of disabled researchers.

Models of disability

From the perspective of the **medical model** of disability, the disability and/or the disabled person is viewed as the problem. There is a deficit. In research settings, this person cannot complete our standard application form because they cannot read small print; is unable to read adequately; cannot review a book list and prioritise reading; does not have the skills to plan their research and manage their time; is unable to work independently because of their low self-confidence; cannot handle a viva because of poor communication skills. The crux of the matter is that they are not able.

The **social model** of disability would say about the same situations that it is our sometimes inappropriate or insufficient responses as research or support staff and as institutions which create an inaccessible research environment. All the negative effects could be countered by:

- having application forms in alternative formats
- prioritising reading with students
- planning with students adequate time for reading
- advising on and assisting with setting and meeting goals
- helping students break down their research into manageable portions
- feeding back on content and checking that they have someone else to do the proofreading
- organising practice viva sessions which become increasingly challenging
- asking the student what support they need
- providing or monitoring the provision of that support.

It is a difficult but essential change in perspective. Through the social model we are not looking at the impact of disability on the research process, but the impact of the research process on a disabled student. It is then a small step to address the question: how can we prevent a person being disabled by the activities of research?

The social model underpins all recent legislation and in the UK, the QAA Code of Practice.[7] The onus is on us and our institutions to eradicate exclusive practices, policies and culture. A blind doctoral candidate describes the ideal:

> **Everyone within the department with whom I have contact has been very welcoming, accepting and respectful and, for the first time in my academic career, I have felt included on an equal basis which has been fantastic. Just the same as any student, I require the support of my peers and I do receive and reciprocate support with fellow PhD students and staff members which is really positive.**

The language of disability

The issue of what language to use when talking about disability is sometimes viewed by non-disabled people as problematic. It can become a barrier to ease and immediacy of communication with a disabled student. We can be concerned with the correct terminology to use and embarrassed by inadvertently using phrases like 'See you next week' or 'Take that idea and run with it.' In fact, disabled students will say that those are not the type of expressions that give offence.

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[7] QAA Code of Practice Section 3: Students with Disabilities (1999)
http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/default.asp

I was born with a congenital muscular condition and, although I do not use a wheelchair, I do try to avoid steps/stairs/steep inclines if at all possible... In encounters where it is necessary to label myself I use the term 'disabled student' and, if clarity is needed, I say that I have a 'mobility impairment'.
PhD student

As the student who has just spoken implies, each disabled person will have their preferred terminology. We can take our lead from them. But there is language which needs to be avoided. Clark and Marsh[8] discuss some terms commonly used as 'patriarchal in nature, evoking the notion that disabled people need looking after'.

It is acceptable to say 'disabled student', but using 'the disabled', 'the blind' or 'the deaf' implies homogeneous groups defined by their disability. 'Normal' or 'able-bodied' reinforce the medical model – that disabled people are not able. It is better to use the phrase 'non-disabled students'.

We need to be aware that the words we use about disabled students can reflect a deficit model where a disabled person is viewed as lacking something which non-disabled people possess. That perspective is unhelpful, can militate against change and may undermine disabled students' confidence in us and/or the institution. It is not a case of political correctness; it involves research staff and non-disabled research students using language which disabled students find acceptable and which does not undermine the equity of relationships within the research community.

[8] *Patriarchy in the UK: the Language of Disability* Clark, L. and Marsh, S. (2002) is available at www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/archiveuk/index

3 Issues and responses

Tierney and Rhoads (1994) point out that merely to increase the diversity of those we recruit is insufficient. The culture needs reshaping. 'Increasing diversity demands structural change.'[9] There are many variables which influence retention and completion. Some of those variables have nothing to do with doctoral supervision, but involve increasing debt; competition for funding; balancing demands of family and the need to work whilst studying; distance from the institution; childcare responsibilities. We also need to place diversity on more agendas than our own. It is an institutional issue. Therefore from the outset we need to work in tandem with students, administrators, disability support staff, those in graduate schools who manage research and those who implement research and generic skills development. Supervision is central to a holistic institutional response to enable the growth of an inclusive and accessible research community.

Using the findings of the research we conducted on the barriers faced by disabled research students, we will now summarise the issues and look at ways of effectively addressing them.

Interviewing

You receive an application from a d/Deaf graduate for a doctoral programme. They really have everything you are looking for in terms of skills, knowledge, research experience and fieldwork. But you have concerns:

- Will they handle the one-to-one interviewing which is part of the proposed methodology?
- Will they be able to work with other members of the team with the blend of good humour, stimulating exchange of ideas and mutual support which you like to encourage?
- How can you find this out at interview without being intrusive and without awkwardness?

Now reverse that scenario. They really do have everything you are looking for, and you wish to ensure that the interview becomes an opportunity for the candidate to verify their expertise.

- What adjustments to your interview practice should you make to enable them to do justice to their abilities?

[9] Tierney, W.G. & Rhoads, R.A. (1994) *Faculty socialization as a cultural process: A mirror of institutional commitment.* ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 93-6. Washington DC. George Washington University, School of Education and Human Development.

- How could adjustments, if they are needed, be made to the project methodology and the roles within the team to make it possible for this uniquely talented person to be part of the team?
- What insights and additional gifts will this d/Deaf researcher bring to the programme?

It may be that fear of ineffective communication and concerns about saying and doing the right thing can make selectors insecure. A d/Deaf applicant will let you know their communication requirements – whether they will work through a BSL/English interpreter; if they use a lip speaker; whether they lip read. If you know in advance, you can seek advice about how the room should be arranged for someone who lip reads, what the etiquette is when working with an interpreter. You can let the interpreter have the questions in advance so that they are aware of any specialist terminology.

Preparation will create confidence in you as an interviewer and subsequently in the candidate. There is no need to ask searching questions about how they will cope as a deaf researcher, simply how they will cope as a researcher. It will become clear in the interview how they will manage. But if you have any remaining concerns, clarify how they would approach the research activities, as you would with any candidate.

Starting supervision

First meetings between a supervisor and new student are significant events. For a disabled research student there may be some additional factors at work.

- Will my supervisors see my disability first?
- What can I expect in terms of support?
- Will I have to ask for support or will it be offered?
- How much can I tell them about my requirements?
- Will they know what to ask?

A student on a research degree programme expressed some of the initial apprehensions:

> **... I feel that people see someone sitting in a wheelchair and I have this slurred speech. And these people think to themselves, 'Well, this person can't be anything.' It's not written across my head – Bachelor of Science and Master of Philosophy. It's a chair and someone who speaks with an impediment.**

Students said that they would have valued early opportunities to talk confidently with supervisors about supervisors' expectations and in that context about where and when they might encounter problems. For example, one dyslexic doctoral candidate with writing difficulties discussed with his main supervisor strategies for managing supervision meetings. His supervisor realised that the student would find it hard to listen, absorb, process information and make notes in meetings. So the supervisor offered to write bullet-pointed notes, freeing the student to listen and exchange ideas.

Here is a scenario.

> Claire is dyslexic. At her interview she explained to you that she has some organisational difficulties.

What questions would it be helpful and acceptable to ask? What do you need to know and what does Claire need to know? Below are some suggestions.

- You mentioned at interview that you have difficulties organising your work. How have you managed your study before – on your degree programme/taught postgraduate course?
- Research at doctoral level makes a lot of demands on you. How can we best support you in planning your work?
- You will have to sustain a complex workload over at least three years. How can your supervisory team help you to manage this?
- Would it be helpful for you to see the strategies that other dyslexic students with organisational difficulties have used?
- Are there other issues for you around teaching and giving presentations?
- Do you know about learning support within the university?
- Have you had an appointment with the disability service so that you can have a full assessment of your support requirements?

Realism and sensitivity are keys to opening the dialogue. It is important that both supervisor and student, in collaboration with a disability adviser if that is appropriate, set the ground rules. Such dialogue can lead to a more productive and professional relationship from the outset. It also clarifies expectations – of student and supervisor – and enables both to identify the roles of each supervisor, the learning support tutor or disability adviser and the graduate school staff.

Accessible times and places

Some students talked about supervision meetings held in inaccessible offices and at inappropriate times. A blind PhD student found late afternoon meetings problematic in the winter because they had no night vision. A student with mobility impairment experienced the highest levels of pain in the morning, which made early meetings unproductive. A researcher with ME had to climb a steep staircase to meet with their supervisor. The barriers were built inadvertently – but they were still disabling.

It may be a good idea to ask students if there are any issues around timing and venues. Additionally we could ask ourselves whether it is practicable to hold meetings in other rooms or at other times from those which are our norm. If we view making such changes as discomforting, why do we find it so and what circumstances would justify those adjustments?

Sometimes it is a case of literally levelling the playing field – holding meetings on the ground floor of a building without lifts for a student with ME or along a corridor which has no steps for a wheelchair user. At other times it could be listening and responding to a student's requirement for a chair which gives adequate support, or a student who is telling you that they have epilepsy managed by medication which makes them drowsy at certain times of the day.

Supporting the planning of research

All research students have uncertainty built into their programmes. They need to be ready to change their route as their work uncovers unexpected material which challenges original hypotheses. They may need to review and revisit ideas over the course of their research. They have to learn to live with and manage that uncertainty. There will, however, be the very firm foundation of the research degree structure, the known outcomes of a thesis and viva – and the time constraints which are built into the structure.

The research process is not linear, but the core components are logically linked. For some disabled students, particularly those with organisational issues arising from a specific learning difficulty like dyslexia or dyspraxia, planning research is a formidable barrier. We may think that this might debar them from the research experience. All researchers must be able to be independent travellers.

But research supervision is about enabling students to become independent by providing them with a map, a compass or a description of the route. For example, some dyslexic students will excel at the linking of random ideas, the big picture, conceiving original ideas and in lateral problem-solving. They will have many of the gifts crucial to successful research. But the breaking down of their research activities into small steps and the management of their time may cause some problems. To release their full and unique potential, it can be important to provide supervisory support in the planning of interim goals and allocation of time.

Based on this understanding of appropriate adjustment, here are some possible strategies for supporting a student in planning and organising their work.

- Talk to the student about what is expected from them in postgraduate research degree study.
- Find out what difficulties, if any, the planning of their research might bring.
- Find out the student's preferred method for working with, and presenting, their planning e.g. as a mind map, another visual method, using colour coding. Encourage them to present their plans in their preferred form.

- Check out what software they use; many dyslexic research students find mind mapping software like Inspirations[10] a useful tool for the visual organisation of ideas and for creating sequences.
- Be willing to engage with a planning approach unlike more traditional or accepted methods – one that may be different from your own.
- Help the student to set realistic targets which take into account the research activities which may present hurdles.
- Assist in prioritising activities, including reading. If the student, for example, reads more slowly or has low energy or concentration levels, then your informed support can assist the student to select their reading efficiently. Perhaps suggest a good background text which will give a framework for their study.
- Within each part of the plan, encourage the student to break down complex tasks into manageable units.
- Define what tasks are expected to be completed and when. Check with the student that the timeframe is manageable.
- Review the planning at each meeting. It could be that both supervisor and student may underestimate or overestimate what is possible.
- Point students towards resources that may help them to develop their own strategies for managing research.
- Consider linking them with a more experienced student or postdoctoral researcher who can help to review and discuss plans.

A dyslexic doctoral candidate – for whom reading and writing as well as planning were challenges – described the partnership between him and his supervisors:

> **We planned out how long it would take to do this amount of reading, how long it would take to do this writing, ... when I could hand it in and then when we would have the meeting to discuss. They (my supervisors) always really work; they have always read everything I've done and given me feedback on what I have done. That really does boost confidence as well.**

We may want to question how independent the research can be if we, as supervisors, help individual students to structure their work. However, if we are able to bear in mind that any adjustments we make are about creating equity, then the task becomes easier. It distinguishes between an enabling action and a disabling intervention. The first allows the student to develop their skills as an independent researcher; the second creates an imbalance, shifting responsibility from the student to the supervisor. Making reasonable adjustments to supervisory practice does not mean undermining the student's autonomy or the maintenance of academic standards. It is simply about equipping the student for the journey.

[10] See www.techdis.ac.uk pages on technology topics for examples of mind-mapping software.

Demystifying the language of research

The currency of the research community is the language used to exchange, explore and debate ideas. Ownership of that language is one of the keys to the academic kingdom. It gives status, validity and membership. It may be assumed that the language of research will be acquired through discourse and reading. It will be absorbed incidentally by listening to academic staff and peers. The importance of this process should not be underestimated. Mastery is essential, as Grix advises research students:[11]

> If you command the basic vocabulary of generic research, you are far more likely to choose the correct theories, concepts or methods to use in your work. By grasping the core tools used in research, much of the mystery that can surround it begins to disappear.
>
> [...] knowledge of the 'nuts and bolts' that make [scholarship] up can go a long way to ensuring that the tools of research are used properly. If you have the right tools and you know how to employ them, the research process becomes a great deal easier and *quicker*.

If subject terminology is not accessible, then the student can be stopped at the threshold. From the doorway, the research community can appear to be a very exclusive society.

A deaf PhD student who lip-reads explained their predicament:

> **Discussions with my supervisor have been difficult because of the huge amount of technical ... language they use. This is probably a problem for any PhD student who is starting work in a new field and doesn't understand all the technical terms. But for a deaf student with a more limited vocabulary it can be a huge barrier to their understanding of the project.**
>
> **I have a very wide vocabulary but people who are high up in academia ... will use long words where I would use short ones. When they are doing this all the time, in every sentence, it can take me ages to realise what they are saying because I am just not used to these words being used.**

A BSL (British Sign Language)/English interpreter, Paul Haan, talked about the issues for Deaf research students whose first language is BSL and for interpreters.

> **In my experience I find that ... terms and various types of concepts can be extremely difficult to interpret. Mainly this is related to the meaning value attached to any particular stretch of discourse. This will change according to the context of the subject.**

[11] Grix, J. (2001) *Demystifying Postgraduate Research.* Birmingham: Birmingham University Press.

In many cases this means the supervisor and tutor need to bring the intended (denotative/connotative) meaning to the surface making it more accessible to the Deaf and disabled student. A good tutor will provide examples and analogies to unpack meaning (situate the example in real life). This goes a long way to supporting the interpreter and student and enhancing the learning experience. Once a concept or term is understood usually a Deaf student creates their own sign that can be used. This encapsulates the essence of the meaning and, if embraced by the Deaf Community, can become part of the BSL lexicon.

A confident dyslexic PhD candidate described the support network of her peers where all could share their bafflement and explore language together. But not all are given the gift of assertiveness which is necessary to be able to say, 'I don't know what you mean.' A more diverse research community demands a more inclusive approach. We need to ensure that we enable students to acquire and confidently use research terms. Here are some ways in which we may make language more accessible.

- Convey in early meetings to the student that it is acceptable for them to say when they do not understand the meaning or usage of an unfamiliar term.
- Direct the student to existing glossaries of subject-specific language.
- Consider compiling a glossary of general research terminology with plain English definitions. It could be a useful tool for all students.[12]
- At each meeting flag up new words and write them down so that students with language difficulties can see the spelling.
- Before any meetings or seminars with d/Deaf students, discuss with communication support workers, lip speakers or BSL/English interpreters specialist vocabulary and its meaning.
- Check at the end of meetings whether students want clarification of any particular words or concepts.
- Simply make it possible for students confidently and without embarrassment to ask you what you mean.

Intensive reading

Anyone beginning supervision with a doctoral student will expect a level of reading commensurate with the highest level of study. We will assume that in front of us is someone who can construct meaning from what they read; infer unstated meanings; assimilate learning; extrapolate arguments; draw conclusions; and relate the authors' ideas to their own hypotheses. We also may assume that they can do all this instinctively and efficiently.

Reading is a complex process, yet most of us are unconscious of the complexity. We just read. But what if there are additional issues?

[12] For a sample glossary of general terms used in research, see: http://www.premia.ac.uk/downloads/Glossaryofresearchterms.pdf

Most of us are used to skim reading, extracting key information and retaining it for use at a later date. Many dyslexic readers may find skim reading difficult and, for some, it is impossible. They need time to read for meaning. Extracting information that is relevant to the purpose of their reading presents particular challenges to dyslexic readers; it demands an understanding of the whole piece of literature and all its words, nuances and arguments.

Dyslexic readers could find the retention of key information hard for several reasons; short-term memory difficulties can be one of the characteristics of dyslexia and mental storage of the text's content is an additional process in what is, to a dyslexic learner, an already complex task.

The reading ability of a dyslexic person is not a marker of intelligence. One dyslexic PhD candidate described themselves as 'not neurotypical'. The wiring is different and the skills are different. There are many examples of brilliant researchers in science and in other disciplines who are dyslexic. If, as is believed, Albert Einstein was dyslexic, it becomes very difficult to harbour fears about the potential of dyslexic researchers to succeed.

Enabling technology, such as software that reads the printed word to blind students, may be seen as creating parity. But technology slows down the process of reading, particularly in subjects which use numbers and diagrams. It is a good idea to try out the software, to experience the process of reading through an electronic intermediary. It can help us to understand the issues and the implications for realistic research planning.

> **It also took a while for my supervisor to realise just how slowly I could read. This is accentuated by the subject-specific notation which includes a significant number of sub- and super-scripts, symbols etc. They are both difficult to read, even using access technology, and completely impossible for an OCR (scan and read back) system, my preferred method of reading, to handle. Diagrams were also difficult to access, as these were often three-dimensional plots which took a good deal of time to study for the important detailed information that they include.**
> PhD student who is blind

Reading will have an impact too on Deaf students whose first language is British Sign Language. Pre-lingual d/Deaf students (born deaf) do not learn English in the way that, for example, international students are able to. They cannot be surrounded by the language and absorb it by osmosis, because they cannot hear it. Additionally BSL is wholly visual; Deaf students therefore do not have either a written or a spoken language as a foundation for learning a second language.

Research shows that the reading age of d/Deaf school leavers is below the national average. We may expect that d/Deaf people reaching research education are functioning at a relatively advanced level. However, reading remains a very difficult and time-consuming task for some d/Deaf students; their vocabulary may be restricted when compared with their hearing peers.

Here are some suggestions for supporting the reading required by research study.

- Find out from the outset which tasks and activities the student may find problematic. It could be, for example, that you are supervising a dyslexic student for whom reading is ***not*** an issue or you are meeting for the first time with a hard of hearing student who has acquired deafness and whose language skills and reading are at a high level.
- Ask the student if they have contacted the disability service to discuss their learning support requirements. If not, advise them to do so.
- Ensure that the student is aware of the funding available to meet their support requirements, for example to meet the costs of a reader or adaptive software.
- Liaise with the disability adviser with whom your student is working to explore the reading issues and devise support strategies.
- If the student uses assistive software e.g. screen reader, enlarger, scanner, ask the student how much extra time it takes so that realistic time frames can be devised.
- Identify key texts which really are essential reading, ones which will most efficiently provide the foundation the student needs for their research.
- Prioritise reading lists and, if possible, identify for the student key chapters and sections.
- Find out whether the student can access relevant journals using their existing software. The library will be able to give advice on this.
- Find out if the library catalogue is accessible using the student's assistive software.
- Create reading plans which are realistic and attainable. Check back with the student regularly to review their reading schedule.
- Confirm with students in supervision meetings that they are interpreting the literature effectively.
- Direct the student to study guides, particularly those which are written for students with language difficulties.

Extended writing

There is a huge step to be taken when students commit their ideas to paper. Each one of us knows something of the uncertainty: fears about how the work will be received; indecision about phraseology; doubts about conveying adequately in words what we have thought – even obsessed – about for many months or years; apprehension about our ability to do justice to the subject matter.

We can perhaps add to that list a fear of criticism. How much more are those uncertainties increased if there are difficulties with sentence structure, spelling and confident use of an academic writing style. A PhD student who is Deaf and whose first language is BSL said:

> **The issues are... having confidence in my English skills. Are they up to academic level? Has my poor school education affected me in later life, especially grammar? If I do not meet academic levels, will this be related to being Deaf or that I simply do not meet the required standards?**

A doctoral candidate with dyslexia commented:

> **I cannot write. When I say I have difficulties writing, people think I must be able to write but .... more slowly. But I cannot write. I can't use some software because it needs you to key in the first one or two letters. I don't know what the first two letters are.**

Other students may find intensive writing physically painful or those with low energy levels will find the concentration on one task exhausting. But none of these scenarios mean that the student is unable to complete their thesis. As the dyslexic student above said, 'The computer is my wheelchair.' Technology has advanced sufficiently to enable thought to be conveyed on paper electronically. Computers cannot conceive original ideas, undertake lengthy research, conduct interviews, construct questionnaires, decide methodology, distinguish what is significant or divine the secrets of the universe. But what they can often do is make it possible for the researcher to commit ideas to paper.

Here is another scenario. How would you manage this situation?

Joe has mental health difficulties and his confidence in his own abilities is very low. He gained a first in his degree. He has put off several deadlines for submitting his first chapter to you. His explanation to you is that he does not think he has fully understood the findings of his fieldwork – although discussion with him shows that he has.

Some possible approaches are:

- Encourage Joe to put something, however brief, down on paper.
- Highlight his understanding of the results; confirm the validity of his interpretation so that he has the confidence to commit the findings to paper.
- Review Joe's work plan with him. Stagger the writing-up process so that he gains in confidence and builds up the amount of writing he does.
- If the issue is persistent, then advise him to look at student support services/counselling/learning support.
- Ensure that all supervisors know what the teaching and learning issues are and that there is consistency across the team in handling the issues.

There is again a need for us to differentiate; no two people experience disability in the same way. Some will have designed their own learning strategies and will have been using those methods for many years. Others could well learn how to manage their thesis more effectively with advice from academic staff members who are willing to adapt, experiment and improvise. Peers can share what has worked for them and support staff can also give advice about what might be a successful supervisory strategy.

Giving feedback

One dyslexic doctoral student described telephone feedback on their work in progress. Their supervisor would work through line by line the spelling and punctuation errors. The concentration on the student's specific learning difficulties rather than, for example, the quality of the ideas and structure of the argument was not too encouraging. It reflected back the student's own feelings of inadequacy and uncertainty about their right to be studying at this level.

Early intervention by learning support tutors or disability advisers can mean that proofreading is funded and starts at the outset, freeing supervisors to give feedback on the quality of the structure and content. It also enables the supervisor to concentrate on the positive features of the work while at the same time giving constructive feedback on areas for development.

Access to the whole research environment

In research, perhaps more than in any other level of study in higher education, informal and incidental learning opportunities abound. Learning from peers in social and work-based settings, networking within the institution and across interdisciplinary academic teams all contribute to a vibrant learning community.

The exchange of ideas, methods and knowledge can take place in shared offices or laboratories and in everyday social settings. If those places and opportunities are inaccessible, then the whole research experience is narrower and is defined by its boundaries. Disabled students have identified barriers to incidental learning well beyond those of rooms that are inaccessible to those with mobility impairments.

- A blind student became distanced from other researchers because of a lack of funding for adaptive equipment when they started.
- A deaf student could not join in the discussions over coffee because lip reading was impossible sitting around a long rectangular table.
- A student with mental health difficulties whose office was on a different floor from the rest of the team found social interaction increasingly difficult.
- A student with a mobility impairment was unable to participate in the informal network because of their department's inaccessibility.

Access to the whole research environment is essential for all students if they are to benefit from the motivation, stimulation and excitement of interacting with their peers. The research curriculum as a whole involves social as well as formal learning opportunities. When it works for a disabled student, it has a very positive impact on their whole research experience.

As for inter-departmental social events, .. I've been lucky because for two years I knew the department's postgraduate representative quite well so, whenever there were gatherings organised, he would make sure that the place hired was accessible. I have also been fortunate to find, amongst my fellow postgraduates, a small group of extremely sincere and generous friends. Whenever my planning has gone awry or when something pops up out of nowhere, I can rely on one of them to get me through.
PhD student with mobility impairment

As the student above makes clear, there are additional resources out there; our responsibility for providing support and opportunities for exchanging ideas can be shared with the student's peers. This particular access issue may seem to be remote from the supervisor's role. The following scenario may prompt us to look at where responsibility lies and the extent of a supervisor's involvement.

A blind student has been selected as part of a research project team. The main research facilities and base room are accessible. But the student will not have received her assistive software and equipment until she has had an assessment of her requirements. That will not take place before she registers.

Some possible responses are:

- The main supervisor contacts the disability service to discuss what the issues might be, particularly in the period before adaptive equipment and software are in place. They are particularly concerned about the integration of the student into the team, both socially and academically.
- The disability adviser makes contact with the student to find out what assistive technology she already has and to discuss whether these resources are appropriate for the research programme. The adviser suggests that the disability service loan the student necessary software which could be installed on a university computer in the base room. That interim arrangement will enable the student to work alongside her peers until the student's assessment of requirements is completed and agreed by the funding body.
- The supervisor asks two non-disabled members of the team to act as supporters in the initial stages, providing assistance in introducing her to the team and initially escorting her to events. A rota is devised to ensure that all early events are made accessible. The students are offered a short training and awareness session in visual impairment by the disability service.
- All the suggested adjustments are talked through and agreed with the student before her arrival.
- The supervisor, disability adviser and the support students meet with the student on arrival. The supporters enable her to feel part of the team from the outset and raise awareness in the rest of the team of the issues. In subsequent months the student is routinely involved in all social activities and supported to do so by all the team members.

Collaborative action shares out responsibility and encourages a co-ordinated approach to accessibility issues. It makes integration into the research community a reality and lays the foundation for productive teamwork.

Accessible fieldwork

Disabled researchers have experience of managing their disability and their support on a daily basis. As researchers, they will probably be able to identify research methods that will be difficult. In their planning it is likely that the methodology, if it is of their choosing, will take account of what is possible within their parameters. What seems to be problematic is the dichotomy that can exist between what the student views as a realistic fieldwork plan and how their supervisors perceive it.

One student talked about the impact of a fieldwork programme which was unrealistic:

> **As well as feelings of helplessness, it was an extremely draining time. I look back through my research journals now and they are all about my frustrations regarding not being able to make far-reaching plans because I had to rely on so many things and so many people.**
>
> **Each day presented a new set of problems and each solution found only moved me a millimetre nearer a final destination that always felt miles away. Every effort I made felt so futile. I became tired of having to stop, think and plan before doing anything. It runs far deeper than the odd staircase in the wrong place because it's about the daily uncertainty of strange surroundings, the constant concern for trivial arrangements and the inability to go with the flow of the people I was meant to be quietly witnessing.**
>
> **The worst thing about all this was the lack of support and understanding. I was, like all postgraduates 'in the field', left to my own devices. But my devices were not capable of coping. I felt under pressure not to admit this and not to ask for advice and support.**
> PhD student with mobility impairment

There is a need to make a distinction between encouraging researchers to embrace new challenges and hearing a disabled researcher's perspective on proposed activities. This scenario may help to explore this distinction.

John is blind and is undertaking a research degree programme in education. He and his supervisor are planning the fieldwork element. He needs to gather data on the acquisition of reading skills in schools for students with special educational needs. Observation of classroom activities seems essential.

It could well be that John's proposed fieldwork plan is not feasible. However, if the proposal is coming from him rather than his supervisor, it may be that he has worked out a strategy for coping with 'observations'.

Is John taking along a peer support worker who could supplement his heard observations with their visual observations? Are heard 'observations' as good as visual observation? Is there any way of testing this out? Is he supplementing his observations through interviews with children and/or teachers and/or educational psychologists?

If, after discussion, the supervisory team feels that his research will be compromised, then alternative methods will need to be explored.

Assisting a student in the planning of fieldwork involves dialogue in which each hears the other's perspective. As supervisors, there is a responsibility to listen, challenge and adapt. As students, there are the same responsibilities. Once the student starts in the field, it is good to review progress with them; we can set up meetings during this phase to talk through difficulties and successes. Sometimes ingenuity and a willingness to change tack are the key ingredients in designing a fieldwork plan that is achievable and productive within the individual's boundaries.

When fieldwork involves travel to another country or situations where there are cultural differences in perceptions of and responses to disability, we need to seek specialist guidance and engage with local contacts.[13]

Academic networking

Informal and formal networking is the life-blood of academia. Advice given to students in handbooks and the literature is to establish their own informal networks while participating in formal ones like professional associations and conferences. Such networking can counteract isolation, stimulate and motivate by placing individual research in a wider context, create opportunities for attending conferences and giving papers, and develop skills which will enhance employability.

There are many reasons why networking can be an issue for disabled students. Effective networking demands strong written and spoken communication. It also needs the student to be confident and assertive, ready to maximise opportunities for exchange of knowledge and ideas. The person or group with whom the student wishes to network needs to be at ease, unthreatened and responsive. Most importantly it means a recognition by the student that they have something to contribute which is of worth.

[13] SWANDS – a collaborative project in universities in South West England has produced a guide for universities which includes fieldwork and international placements: http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/assets/SWA/Sendadoc.pdf

No-one feels entirely comfortable entering a room full of strangers. If communication difficulties are added to the situation, then it can be fraught with unease. A Deaf student who works with an interpreter may have to approach an unknown person, knowing that the person could be unaware of how to converse through an interpreter. A blind student may need a non-medical helper to guide them to the person. A student with low self-esteem may simply find it impossible to handle a dialogue when they meet someone for the first time. For a dyslexic person, email correspondence with people who would expect a high level of written skills can be difficult.

Here are some suggestions for enabling students to develop networks.

- Let students know about email professional lists.
- Introduce the student directly to people in our own networks.
- Help to set up meetings with individuals. If there is a communication issue, ask the student's permission to prepare the contact for the meeting. For example, explain that the student will arrive with an interpreter, lip speaker, non-medical helper, offer advice if it is needed and highlight access issues so that meetings take place in accessible venues.
- Prepare a student for a seminar at which it is expected that the student will contribute. We need to ask what the issues will be and find out whether they have their own strategies. A student who lip reads said that, when they enter a group of unknown academics, they explain that they are a lip-reader, that they need group members to signify who is speaking, that speakers will need to face them and that they will ask speakers if there is something they have not been able to understand. It puts student and group members at ease.
- A student may need to rehearse the situation if they are lacking in confidence. Just telling them what it will look like, what is expected from them and giving them information in advance about the participants will help
- Perhaps one of the most useful things we can do is to encourage students to participate in research and generic skills opportunities, both those offered in-house and those organised in all UK regions through the UK GRAD programme.[14] They will help the student to form informal networks by introducing them to their peers and by the development of confidence that is integral to the programmes. Informal networks within and outside the student's institution help to keep problems in perspective and counteract personal and intellectual isolation.

[14] UK GRAD Programme http://www.grad.ac.uk

Attending conferences

Here is one student's perspective on conference attendance.

> **Postgraduates are expected to attend academic conferences. I am in my third year and have only just attended my first. This is directly because I was aware of the extensive planning it would take ... going to a week-long conference takes three months of planning. While my fellow postgraduates write a paper and jump on a train or aeroplane, I have to: arrange funding for and find a non-medical helper willing to come; find and book accessible, often expensive, accommodation; find and arrange an accessible way to get there and ensure that the conference itself will be accessible. Underlying all that is an increasing and rising feeling of dread. At any point something could step in my way and the efforts of the previous weeks could pour themselves down the drain.**
> PhD student with a mobility impairment

Other students may find that conferences present a very real challenge to their self-belief and self-image. If a student with, for example, dyslexia has spent their early education being told by others that they are lazy or unintelligent, the idea of attending and presenting at an academic conference may be very threatening. A research supervisor spoke about one of their students who is dyslexic:

> **.. I encouraged them to give a presentation at a ... conference last year; they had never given a paper before and they were very, very scared about it. I know that everyone is scared of giving papers but I am a hugely confident person myself and am very good with language so I couldn't really empathise at all – I could sympathise but I could not put myself in their place. I was just aware that they were terrified.**
> Research supervisor

How can we make conference attendance more accessible to disabled students? Here are some suggestions.

- It is helpful if we can let students know at the outset what the expectation is for conference attendance. How many? How soon? All disabled students need to know at the beginning because, if/when they are being assessed for their support requirements, additional costs for support to attend conferences should be flagged up to the assessor. Students can then plan ahead, confident in the knowledge that their support needs at conferences will be adequately funded.
- If the logistics of conference attendance are very complex and time-consuming (as they can be, for example, for students with personal care needs, for Deaf students who work with BSL/English interpreters and blind students who may need non-medical helpers), then it would be a good idea to look at who could give support to the student in their planning: the disability service; non-disabled peers; supervisors. The type of help which might be useful includes:

- contacting the conference organisers to check out accessibility
- making initial enquiries on behalf of the student about accessible transport
- giving confirmation to the funding agency that the conference is an essential component of their research degree
- liaising with registers of support workers who might be able to accompany the student
- finding out if other students on the same programme are attending and whether they can be part of the support package, paid or unpaid.

- If a student indicates that giving presentations causes extreme anxiety, then early and sensitive intervention may help to overcome their fears. It is not appropriate for us to ignore, or put to one side, their concerns in the hope that they will somehow conquer them given time. It is advisable to talk through with the student what will be difficult for them and work together on strategies to develop confidence.
- Encouraging students to give presentations in informal settings to a small audience (research team meetings, research seminars) can help to build up self-belief and pave the way to larger, external audiences. Opportunities to co-present can also help to increase confidence. We might try setting up mock presentations, or encourage the student to set this up with their peers, so that they can try out their presentation in a safe environment.
- If confidence continues to be an issue, then we need to look at other strategies. Counselling or assertiveness training may help the student identify the context and cause of their anxiety and develop the means of managing it. It may also help them to build up a toolkit for surviving conferences. The disability service can be a good starting point for advice about referral and relevant agencies.

The first student's story about the barriers to conference attendance can now be updated:

> **Attending conferences certainly was a challenge worth all the effort...for two different reasons. The first conference I attended was in the USA — getting the chance to see a bit of the world I'd not seen before and receiving an international perspective on my work was great fun and very rewarding. The second conference was a topic-specific conference and it was the first time I had the chance to listen to and converse with a collected group of people who were all working/interested in my particular area of research. It was a fascinating and inspirational few days.**
> PhD student with mobility impairment

Access to the viva

The final hurdle for all students in the UK who are examined by thesis is the viva voce – the oral defence by a candidate of their thesis where the candidate faces examiners, at least one of whom is external to the institution. For some disabled doctoral students this form of examination will present additional challenges and anxieties – challenges that non-disabled candidates do not face.

Although we may understand the implications of the viva for disabled students, we may have very real concerns about the maintenance of academic standards if we consider adjusting the conduct of a viva. The Disability Rights Commission (DRC) addresses some of those tensions in its Good Practice Guide:[15]

> ... examinations and assessments must be rigorous regarding standards so that all students are genuinely tested against an academic benchmark. But similarly, if they are to fulfil their purpose, they must also be flexible regarding the model of measurement so that each student has an equal opportunity to demonstrate their achievement.

As with any form of assessment, it is helpful to clarify what learning outcomes are being examined in the viva. We can then decide whether reasonable adjustments would detract from a valid and fair examination of the learning. While there is no universally agreed definition of the purposes of the viva, we suggest the following elements underpin the assessment. The viva examines a student's ability to:

- place their research in the broader context
- identify its contribution to knowledge
- show detailed knowledge of the thesis, and
- prove that it is the student's own work.

During the viva we expect the candidate to defend their methodology and the findings of the thesis, as well as to be aware of the limitations of these.

In the light of the above, or your own definition, reflect on these case studies. Explore whether the candidate would be substantially disadvantaged without reasonable adjustments and what actions we need to take to create equity in the viva, including the implications for external examiners.

Karen is dyslexic and has used assistive software throughout her PhD to read the literature. The symptoms of her dyslexia are heightened by stress.

Ian has Asperger's syndrome and has social communication difficulties.

Madeleine has cerebral palsy. Those who do not know her well can find it very difficult to understand what she is saying.

Parmit is blind. She uses a text enlarger to read materials.

[15] *Good Practice Guide to the Disability Discrimination Act Part 4: Examinations and Assessment (2002).*

Jack is a Deaf candidate and his first language is BSL He has worked with an interpreter throughout his research in seminars and supervision sessions.

Matthew has mental health difficulties. He has experienced severe panic attacks at times of stress throughout his PhD.

These case studies represent a range of issues. It can sometimes be illuminating when we consider which ones we find it easy to recognise as needing adjustments and with which ones we find it difficult to empathise. It is impossible here to delineate all the possible actions. Here are general suggestions for **supervisors** and those **administering** the viva.

- Several months before a viva date is arranged, talk through with the candidate what impact the viva will have on them. It is a good idea to include one of the institution's disability advisers in early discussions.
- Record the outcomes of the meeting, including an outline of the disability-related issues raised by the viva.
- Talk through with the student what they identify as reasonable adjustments. Reflect on these with academic colleagues and the disability service staff.
- Consider the adjustments. Will they work? Are they reasonable? Do they create parity? Do they maintain academic standards?
- 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 we surmount some of the barriers 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 examinations office, the disability service or the supervisor.
- At each point, check back with the student that what is being arranged is necessary and will work.
- If the student needs personal support (medical or non-medical), then the student or the disability service will be the best placed to locate that support.
- 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.
- Offer to provide examiners with briefing notes, links to awareness materials or in some cases to training. Disability advisers can provide such resources.
- On the day check all arrangements to ensure that the venue and the process of the viva are accessible.
- The chair of the panel has a responsibility to monitor the adjustments and to make sure that the agreed action takes place.
- Review the viva process in the light of experience. Would you or the panel have done it differently? How does the student view the experience? Have they suggestions about how to improve it?

Here too are suggestions for **external examiners.**

- When informed of the type of adjustments needed for a disabled candidate in their viva and the rationale for the adjustments, analyse the practical and academic implications of those adjustments.
- Relay promptly any concerns about the validity of the adjustments to the viva co-ordinator.
- Is it clear what is expected of the examiners? Is there sufficient information to make adjustments with confidence?
- If further information or advice is needed, contact the person co-ordinating the viva. Specify what more is needed – briefing notes, evidence, details of what is expected from examiners, a briefing session, or meeting of the panel prior to the viva.

There are no definitive answers to what constitutes a reasonable adjustment to a viva. It will depend on the individual candidate. However, there is a need for transparent policies and procedures[16], which will demonstrate both a responsiveness to disabled students and maintenance of academic standards. As more disabled graduates enter and successfully complete doctoral study, we will need to share examples of effective practice in the management of the viva.

[16] As discussed, for example, in the SRHE Guide for Internal and External Doctoral Examiners in this series.

4 Harnessing difference

In the midst of the competing agendas and new initiatives which the research community faces, is disability a priority?

The answer must be that it is central to what we do. Responsiveness between supervisor(s) and postgraduate researcher is key to success in this paradigmatic learning relationship. Each gives to and gains from the other over time. Reflecting on our practice in relation to disabled research students brings us close to the heart of what makes an effective, diverse research community. If we are to have access to the best researchers, we need to ensure that we have access to **all** researchers — whatever their background. An inclusive community admits and harnesses difference. It is at ease with and is confident in managing difference.

Many of the disabled research students we talked with found most difficult and exhausting the fact that they had to fight for adjustments. They wished to be free of that need to prompt, and sometimes to shout for, their entitlement. We can simply make it easier for disabled doctoral students to manage research study through partnership with the student and collaboration with colleagues across the institution. One of the keys to that partnership is mutual recognition of the barriers.

A doctoral candidate said:

> **As I continue on this postgraduate research journey, it is becoming clearer and clearer just how competitive the academic arena is. There is a pressure to prove that you are efficient, capable and independent. This does not sit easily with being a disabled researcher. Although I am more than capable at the academic and teaching part, I do need support, and if that isn't in place, I am not efficient or capable. I am, indeed, disabled! There is a very tacit but very real pressure never to admit this and to stay strong, to put on a mask and pretend that all is well. It is a big issue for me and one that I negotiate on a daily basis.**

Creating parity is about the judicious and creative use of existing tools to free a research student from those things which might confine and stifle creativity, whether it is an inflexible procedure or a traditional practice. The rewards are immense.

> **I think it's always better to attempt something today than not to attempt it at all... I never thought I would become a lecturer at university. If someone asked me what my ideal job was, I would [have said to] be a lecturer but I never thought I would get up to that. My attitude is if I didn't attempt it, that would be failing because all my life I would be sitting back and thinking, "I wonder if I could have really got there?"**

The dyslexic research student who spoke these words was offered a lectureship at a university on completion of their doctorate. They have spoken eloquently of the role of their supervisors in the achievement of their goals. They will provide a role model of what is possible through their own persistence and vision, and a partnership with committed, creative and responsive staff.

5 Resources

Web-based resources

Premia site on which this Guide is based
http://www.premia.ac.uk

This is a set of resources for research and support staff and for disabled postgraduate research students that emerged from the project based at Newcastle University. Users can enter the resources by role and find materials to raise awareness of the issues and reflect on current policies, procedures and practice. There are practical suggestions for supporting disabled researchers and a library of case histories, checklists, glossaries and links.

General sites for staff in HE on inclusive teaching and learning
http://www.open.ac.uk/inclusiveteaching

Published in 2006 by the Open University, this resource provides practical advice about teaching inclusively and will also help in meeting the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act. It gives insight into what study is like for disabled students, and what you can do to make a difference.

http://www.teachability.strath.ac.uk/
This site has very useful materials on making curricula accessible in higher education.

Accessible language
http://artsigns.ac.uk ; http://www.sciencesigns.ac.uk ;
http://www.engineeringsigns.ac.uk

These sites are glossaries of subject-specific terms in British Sign Language. Not only are they excellent resources for d/Deaf students but they have definitions in plain English, making them a useful tool for other learners.

Assistive technology
http://www.techdis.ac.uk

TechDis is an organisation which works closely with the Higher Education Academy. Its website is a rich source of information about the technical resources which can support disabled students and university staff.

Quality framework
http://www.qaa.ac.uk

The Code of Practice Part 3: Students with disabilities (1999) looks at the whole institution, its policies, procedures and practices.

UK legislation on disability and education
http://www.skill.org.uk

Skill (National Bureau for Students with Disabilities) in partnership with the Disability Rights Commission has produced a series of guides for staff in higher education.

Working with international disabled students
http://www.ukcosa.org.uk/pages/disabilityfaqs.doc

UKCOSA's guide for international student officers gives useful information on legal responsibilities and funding of support.

Further reading

Adams, M. & Brown, S. (2006) *Towards Inclusive Learning in Higher Education: Developing Curricula for Disabled Students*. London: Routledge.

Chapters within this book cover assessment, staff development, working with deaf students in HE and many disability-related topics, including subject-specific material.

McAlpine, L. & Norton, J. (2006) 'Reframing our approach to doctoral programs: an integrative framework for action and research', *Higher Education Research & Development*, 25/1, 3–17.

The writers focus on completion rates, factors in non-completion including greater diversity and propose a framework with the student experience at its centre.

Pearson, M. & Kayrooz, C. (2004) 'Enabling Critical Reflection on Research Supervisory Practice', *International Journal for Academic Development,* 9/1, 99–116.

This paper describes the development of the RSQ (Reflective Supervisor Questionnaire), its rationale and effectiveness.

Taylor, S. & Beasley, N. (2005) *A handbook for doctoral supervisors*. London: Routledge.

This book addresses diversity issues within its scope, including work with international students and those from non-traditional backgrounds.

Titles in the current series

1 Research Supervisors and the Skills Agenda:
Learning Needs Analysis and Personal Development Profiling

2 A Guide for Internal and External Doctoral Examiners

3 Supervising Disabled Research Students

4 Supervising International Research Students

Titles in preparation

- Meeting the Needs of Part-time Research Students
- The Bologna Process and Beyond: Implications for Postgraduate Education
- Ethical Issues in Postgraduate Education
- Work Based Learning in Postgraduate Education

The series editors would be glad to hear from anyone who would like to write a Guide for the series. Please contact SRHE on srheoffice@srhe.ac.uk

The Series

The Guides in this series are designed for supervisors, postgraduate tutors, heads of department, deans, members of committees on postgraduate and research matters, students' union officers, technical and academically related staff – in fact anyone who in any way contributes to or is responsible for the support of postgraduate students. The Guides will also be useful for anyone involved in supervising projects at undergraduate level.

Each Guide is based on research and/or reflective practice as outlined in its Preface, but the Guides are not presented as research articles. They are short and practical handbooks which are designed to be helpful and easy to dip into. A range of alternative courses of action are presented, and readers are left to make up their own minds about what is best for them in light of the norms and requirements of their disciplines, departments and institutions, the needs of their students and their own personal predilections. In this way the Guides go far beyond basic codes of practice.

Considerable effort has gone into ensuring that the Guides are as useful and relevant as possible. To this end, each one is peer reviewed to maintain standards; it presents a list of suggested further reading and it requests that readers be kind enough to let the authors have suggestions for improvement in the next edition. The Guides are thus consultative.

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