

An accessible viva

Part 1 - Adjustments to assessment: legislation and academic standards

The final hurdle for all students in the UK who are examined by thesis is the viva - the oral defence by a candidate of their thesis where the candidate faces examiners, at least one of whom is external to the institution. In recent years, there have been numerous studies of students' experiences in the viva (for example, Hartley and Jory 2000, Wallace 2003, Murray 2003, Tinker and Jackson 2002 and 2004). These have demonstrated that a large proportion of candidates approached their vivas with high levels of anxiety and that a significant minority found it a negative experience, even if the outcome was positive. For some disabled students this form of examination will present even more challenges and anxieties not faced by non-disabled candidates.

Legislation and standards

In its *Good Practice Guide to the Disability Discrimination Act Part 4: Examinations and Assessment* (2002) the DRC (Disability Rights Commission) explains that discrimination against disabled students covers all the activities institutions provide for students, including examinations and assessments. In addressing the maintenance of academic standards, the DRC (Disability Rights Commission) says:

The purpose of an assessment, whether it is formative or summative, is to determine a student's academic achievement and skills. To do this, 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. In some cases this may mean changing the existing examinations or assessment practices within an institution. In all cases it will mean being clear about precisely what is being assessed so that modifications may be made without compromising academic standards.

The aim, wherever possible, is to change the delivery or mode of assessment, not to change the way the assessment is marked. Differential marking may be appropriate in some cases, but only if it was not possible to put reasonable adjustments in place for the examination or assessment itself.

This extract pinpoints the issue which concerns many academic staff: how can we make reasonable adjustments and not erode standards? Interestingly, the adjustments to practice which will be discussed in this section are feasible in terms of cost, health and safety and practicality. So the key issue becomes academic standards. That is why it is important to look at the learning which the viva is measuring and whether reasonable adjustments would detract from a valid and fair examination of the learning.

What is being examined in the viva?

The viva assesses 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. The candidate is expected to defend their methodology and findings of the thesis, as well to be aware of their limitations.

The viva is not a test of memory, of a student's command of the spoken word or the effectiveness of the student in engaging with the examiners.

Why make adjustments?

Discrimination against disabled students can take place by treating them less favourably than their non-disabled peers or failing to make a 'reasonable adjustment' when they are placed at a 'substantial disadvantage' compared with other people for a reason relating to their disability. The next part of the materials will explore the concepts of substantial disadvantage in the viva and of reasonable adjustments.

Part 2 - Adjustments to the viva: why and how?

Look at these scenarios. Then consider:

- a. Will the candidate be substantially disadvantaged in their viva if adjustments are **not** made to usual practice? If so, why?
- b. What would constitute reasonable adjustments in these situations – adjustments which would not interfere with academic standards?

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

- a. **Karen will have difficulties in locating sections within her thesis to prove her point. That could put her at a disadvantage. Additional preparation with her supervisor may help to redress the balance. But she might still be unable to access her thesis in the viva as other candidates are able to.**
- b. There is a legal duty on all those involved with the viva to anticipate the issues and therefore what adjustments may be needed. It is essential that Karen is consulted about what she would find difficult in an extended oral examination. A 3-way conversation several months before the viva between supervisor(s), Karen and a disability adviser would help to clarify the nature of difficulties, if any, and how they might be addressed.

Some possible actions in the months leading up to the viva are: the learning support tutor works on techniques with Karen for signposting significant sections of the thesis - visual clues to help her locate key passages and relate them to themes; the supervisor organises at least one practice viva where Karen's strategies for managing the materials are monitored and reviewed; peer support is provided by recent PhD graduates to coach Karen for the viva.

If preparation and support are effective, then it may be unnecessary to make adjustments to the viva. But if Karen is still likely to be disadvantaged, then her supervisor and the disability adviser will need to talk through with Karen what would help. With the student's permission to pass on details of her disability to the examiners, some possible adjustments are: having access to a computer during the viva; the external examiner is asked for written questions a few hours before the viva and, under exam conditions, Karen prepares her answers and the evidence held in the thesis; the examiners allow short breaks in the viva for Karen to rest and refocus.

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

a. Parmit may need some adjustments to the viva. She could be disadvantaged if none are made because the usual back-up material available to non-disabled students – the thesis – may not be accessible to her.

b. Parmit should be consulted on what she might find difficult in the viva. It may be that Parmit is used to memorising material but may find it difficult to manage the viva without having access to her thesis. If at least one practice viva is organised for her by staff, it will be a chance for Parmit to assess whether and what adjustments would help. If an examiner asks her about a particular argument or concept on a specific page, she will need assistive technology to refer to her thesis. Another potential difficulty is that Parmit cannot see the visual clues that say the answer given is sufficient and it is time to move on to the next topic.

Possible adjustments on the day would include: preparing the examiners so that they give agreed verbal signals that the answer is complete and that they wish to start the next question; Parmit has her assistive technology in the room and is able to refer to her thesis; examiners are given some advice by a disability adviser or an external organisation like the RNIB on how to manage the viva with a blind candidate. All – examiners, chair and candidate - will need to feel confident if the viva is to be an opportunity for Parmit to effectively defend her thesis.

3. Jack is a Deaf candidate and his first language is BSL (British Sign Language). He has worked with an interpreter throughout his research in seminars and supervision sessions.

- a. **Jack will need adjustments to usual practice in order to communicate verbally with the examiners. He would be at a substantial disadvantage as a candidate without adjustments.**
- b. Jack communicates in sign language. A team of professional BSL/English interpreters translates the language of the hearing world to Jack. If all the examiners are hearing, then equity can only be achieved if an interpreter is present to translate the examiners' questions into sign language and Jack's signed answers into spoken English. The professional Code of Ethics for BSL/English interpreters cancels out any concerns examiners might have about the interpreter enhancing Jack's answers.

The key adjustment to the assessment process is the use of an interpreter within the viva. However, that adjustment will only work if all the participants in the viva are confident with and in the interpretation process. The interpreter(s) needs to know the content and context of the viva and subject terminology if the communication is to work. The examiners and chair need to know how to work with the interpreter. The student needs to be confident that the interpreter has sufficiently high level signing skills to be able to function in this academic context and that the examiners know how to manage communication.

There are guidelines on how to work with an interpreter, the lay-out of the room and the etiquette:

http://uclan.ac.uk/student_services/accentre/dld/guidelines/interpreter.htm

The disability service within the institution or external agencies like the RNID can give advice. Interpreting is a physically and mentally demanding process. The quality of interpreting drops after twenty minutes. The viva will be longer and therefore examiners will have to be prepared to work with 2 interpreters, who will change over during the course of the viva, or agree breaks. Each interpreter will need to know the subject terminology; examiners will have to be ready to explain and unpack the meaning of their words during the viva.

Paul Hann, a BSL/English interpreter said:

'It's necessary to discuss each participant's communication needs within the interpreted event. It is very important to provide sufficient preparatory information to the interpreter so they can prepare - explanations of terms may also be necessary.'

As Jack's first language is BSL and it is a visual language where brevity is favoured, he may not be used to expansive verbal discourse. Practice will help and mock vivas would also assist his supervisor to identify the issues.

Jack will be more confident in the viva if the preparation of all those involved has been thorough.

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

a. Matthew will probably need adjustments to be made. It is likely that his extreme anxiety would have a negative impact on the outcome of his viva.

b. In discussion with Matthew and the disability adviser, the impact of the viva needs to be explored. Does he think it will be a problem? What adjustments does he think would help? Are they adjustments which are acceptable on academic grounds?

It would be helpful to practice a viva with Matthew, with and without adjustments. Adjustments might include: short breaks in the examination; questions to be asked in the viva prepared beforehand and given to Matthew to work with under exam conditions; asking examiners to devise early questions which Matthew will be more confident in handling and which will ease him into the viva. Again practice beforehand may mean that no adjustments to the viva are necessary. If they are necessary, Matthew will need to agree the information which is passed to the examiners.

5. Ivan is a deaf student who lip reads.

a. Ivan may need adjustments to be made because he could be substantially disadvantaged if he could not fully understand the questions during the viva.

b. There are practical adjustments that will be needed. The room will have to be arranged so that light falls on the examiners' faces. Ideally there should be an uncluttered background so that the candidate is able to concentrate. It is very difficult if examiners sit in front of windows with the light behind. There should be no background noise.

Lip reading is tiring. Nor is it easy to lip read a stranger, especially if they have an accent. It is best if the ground rules are agreed with Ivan before the viva. When it begins, the chair should give clear permission to Ivan to say when he is unsure of what someone has said and if he needs a break. It would be advisable to pre-arrange breaks.

Guidelines for working with a person who lip reads can be found at:
http://www.mid.org.uk/information_resources/factsheets/education/factshe

6. Jude is dyslexic and has short term memory difficulties. She has managed her PhD studies, has well-developed strategies for managing her learning and has also worked with a dyslexia support tutor throughout her research.

- a. **Jude may need adjustments to be made. She could be at a disadvantage if her well-honed learning strategies do not address the difficulties of an oral examination. The viva requires that candidates hold questions in their mind and that their answers refer to the research content.**
- b. As with all disabled students, it would be good for Jude's supervisor to talk with her and her support tutor about the issues that the viva raises. If Jude has developed coping strategies for completing a PhD, then it is possible that she can work out ways of managing the viva. She will need to know what to expect and be given opportunities for practising. Her own preparation will be paramount; ideally she will devise prompts that link her thesis with expected questions. Her learning support tutor can assist her to achieve a system that works for her.

During the viva, it would be good practice for examiners to keep questions short; 2 or 3 part questions would be very difficult for Jude to hold and process. Examiners and chair will need to be aware of the issues so that their method of asking questions is appropriate and it would be advisable for the chair to give permission for Jude to ask examiners to repeat their questions.

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

- a. **The examiners would expect that candidates understand their language, including imagery, and non-verbal communication. Ian could be at a substantial disadvantage because figurative language and understanding non-verbal communication could be very difficult for him to interpret and process.**
- b. People with Asperger's syndrome have social communication skills across a wide spectrum. Ian's requirements in the viva will depend very much on the panel's understanding of his needs. He can be coached in techniques for oral examinations but it is unlikely that practice vivas will achieve substantial gains although it could raise confidence in the process. The adjustments which may be needed are to do with the language in which

examiners frame their questions and their verbal and non-verbal responses to Ian in the viva.

Several months before the viva, the supervisor and Ian's disability adviser discuss with Ian the process of the viva and what difficulties, if any, Ian envisages. Ian has a very thorough understanding of his disability and the possible impact of the viva. The supervisor talks with the examiners and the chair of the panel several weeks before the viva and, with Ian's permission, discloses his disability. The disability adviser writes a briefing for the examiners and, having discussed it with Ian, gives examples of the type of question which he will find difficult. The examiners decide that they will write down all the questions to be asked to ensure that they avoid imagery and colloquialisms. All the questions are written in plain English.

During the viva the examiners keep to the prepared questions and, when commenting or asking subsidiary questions, make sure that they too are expressed in unambiguous, literal language. Having been given a briefing on the difficulties for Ian in non-verbal communication, they can take account of this in the viva. The panel will feel more confident in conducting a robust viva with Ian because they have been well-briefed in advance.

Further information and insight

A Manchester University graduate, Marc Segal's *Coping: a survival guide for people with Asperger syndrome*.

<http://www-users.cs.york.ac.uk/%7Ealister/survival/apersonal.html>

http://web.apu.ac.uk/stu_services/essex/learningsupport/Tutor-Asperger.htm

8. Jiro has multiple disabilities and is a wheelchair user. He experiences high levels of pain and fatigue.

- a. **The viva can last several hours. The length of the examination could have a negative effect on Jiro's pain level and consequently on his concentration.**
- b. The supervisor and disability adviser discuss the issues with Jiro. He is looking forward to the viva but is concerned that he will not be able to sustain concentration over 2 to 3 hours. His pain levels are greatest in the afternoon so his viva is arranged for a morning in an accessible venue (on the ground floor in a building near reserved parking spaces and with an accessible toilet on the same floor). Clear instructions on the venue are sent out to Jiro two weeks before the viva. Breaks of 15 minutes each hour are organised so that Jiro can rest and he is given permission by the chair to request additional breaks if they are necessary.

The examiners and the chair of the panel agree to these adjustments and feel able to be rigorous in their questioning.

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

- a. **Without adjustments Madeleine could be at a significant disadvantage within a viva because there is a strong possibility that the examiners will not be able to understand her answers.**
- b. The supervisor, Madeleine and her disability adviser meet 12 months before the viva is likely to take place. Her supervisor asks Madeleine what issues are likely to arise within the viva. Madeleine is unsure about what to expect in the viva and how long it will last. Extended periods of dialogue are very tiring for her because the physical effort of speaking is very draining. The supervisor explains what to expect.

Madeleine is concerned about being examined orally by people who do not know her speech patterns. She thinks they may be embarrassed by not being able to understand her and that may affect how they perceive her, how the viva is conducted and the outcome.

In order that she is given a chance to 'experience' a viva and so that the disability adviser and supervisor can effectively anticipate her requirements, Madeleine watches a video of a viva and is offered a practice viva to be observed by her adviser and supervisor. As a result, and after discussion with the student, the disability adviser prepares guidelines for the participants which are sent out in advance by her supervisor to all the panel members. They also arrange (and pay for through Madeleine's DSA) a PhD student in the same academic subject who knows Madeleine to accompany her and convey to examiners any answers they are unable to understand.

Examiners are advised to maintain eye contact, ask shorter, one part questions, resist the temptation to finish Madeleine's sentences, be open about not understanding any responses, and address all their questions to her. All examiners are asked to confirm that the arrangements are acceptable. They are also asked to use the first 15 minutes of the viva informally to talk with Madeleine so that they can become attuned to her speech patterns. Breaks are taken after each half hour so that Madeline and the examiners are able to concentrate.

After the viva, the panel meets with the supervisor and disability adviser to review how effective the adjustments have been in creating parity for Madeleine to defend her thesis.

Part 3 - Suggestions for making the viva inclusive

For supervisors and those who administer 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 which will demonstrate both a responsiveness to disabled students and maintenance of academic standards. The suggestions are as much about procedure as practice.

1. 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.
2. Record the outcomes of the meeting, including an outline of the disability-related issues raised by the viva.
3. Talk through with the student what they identify as reasonable adjustments. Reflect on these with academic colleagues and the disability service staff.
4. Consider: Will the adjustments work? Are they reasonable? Do they create parity? Do they maintain academic standards?
5. Talk through with the student how their personal preparation can be handled: mock viva(s); how they can plan their answers and notate their thesis. How much will this influence the provision of support on the day? Can some of the barriers be surmounted by thorough preparation?
6. 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.
7. At each point, check back with the student that what is being arranged is necessary and will work.
8. 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.
9. 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.

10. Offer to provide examiners with briefing notes, links to awareness materials or in some cases to training. Disability advisers can provide such resources.
11. On the day check all arrangements to ensure that the venue and the process of the viva are accessible.
12. The chair of the panel has a responsibility to monitor the adjustments and to make sure that the agreed action takes place.
13. 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 it could be improved?

For examiners

1. 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.
2. Relay promptly any concerns about the validity of the adjustments to the viva co-ordinator.
3. Is it clear what is expected of the examiners? Is there sufficient information for the adjustments to be confidently made?
4. If further information or advice is needed, contact the person co-ordinating the viva. Specify what more is needed – briefing notes, evidence, and detail of what is expected from examiners, briefing session, and a meeting of the panel prior to the viva.

The National Disability Team has produced a [checklist for external examiners](#) which looks more widely at the issues of assessment of disabled students' work. It has also written a checklist from an [institution's perspective](#) about external examining.