

Disability advisers – supporting research students

Introduction - different experiences

A disabled student described their experience after 2 years of doctoral study:

In theory research study with a physical-mobility-impairment should be easier than undergraduate study. To a certain extent, you can choose your subject, choose your institution and choose your timetable. You don't have to wander around campus attending a tight schedule of lectures/tutorials in far-off buildings. However, and it's a big however, in practice it is much, much harder. Research study .. is a lonely, isolating and anxious experience at the best of times. Doing it with an impairment multiplies those factors.

PhD student 2004

All the students we interviewed¹ highlighted the fact that their experience as disabled postgraduate research students differed from their life as undergraduates. The support issues identified by the students reflect that difference.

The personnel who are involved in research students' lives are not the same people they encountered as undergraduates – graduate school administrators, those giving telephone advice, principal investigators, research managers and research supervisors, technicians, dedicated careers advisers, external examiners for thesis and viva.

Many of these staff are involved in a way that is different from any involvement they may have with undergraduates. The context and culture of research education redefine relationships and activities. The research supervisor has a very different role from a personal tutor or lecturer. The external examiner at a viva relates to the candidate differently from the assessor of course work or internal examination. The selector of a doctoral student is interacting during an interview at another level from the undergraduate admissions tutor analysing the personal statement of a potential student. The personnel, and the nature of their involvement with students, are different.

For disability advisers there are fundamental differences too:

- in the information students will need;
- funding mechanisms;
- the nature of the support requirements;
- the personnel with whom they must liaise, negotiate and advocate.

¹ 31 students completed questionnaires and/or were interviewed during the first part of the Premia project. The students were from a range of UK institutions and represented diverse academic disciplines.

These resources aim to:

- give information about the research process and funding;
 - highlight the key stages of the research experience and the key personnel;
 - identify the types of support a disabled research student may need;
 - examine the implications for an institution, both in policy, procedures and staff development.
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Part 2 – Demystifying research study

Final year undergraduates find it difficult to locate sources of information which clearly define research study paths, research qualifications, what is expected of a research student, funding mechanisms, starting points and disability-related issues.

You can use this link for an **explanatory booklet** which you might want to give to students who ask or perhaps to colleagues who are unsure about the nature and processes of research education. It can be adapted and amended for use in your institution.

Part 3 – Starting points

A. For students in receipt of research council funding – studentship/bursary/award

The application process for funding support requirements depends on the particular research council. Usually the student applies directly to the research council from which they will receive their award. You can access all the **research councils** on the front page of their website.



Each research council has guidelines or handbooks which have details of their policy for awarding additional funding to disabled research students. These are available on their websites.



Most research councils are currently **unable** to approve funding prior to registration as a student with the university. It is worthwhile checking their current policy on when they can/will process an assessment of support requirements.



The assessment report needs to address the additional study elements of PGR degree programmes and the related support requirements. The student's main supervisor and the relevant research council will give details of the expectations e.g. number of conferences (national and international); fieldwork, including travel, accommodation, non-medical/medical assistance; writing up the thesis; presenting research findings; teaching undergraduates.



Most research councils will consider additional funding for support requirements if they have not been anticipated in the initial assessment report. However, they prefer that the initial report is an accurate reflection of all support needs.



Research councils' funding for disabled students is at the same level as undergraduate DSA.

B. For UK students not in receipt of research council funding

The DSA application process is the same as at undergraduate level. If the student is not a research council funded student, they will apply to their LEA for DSA. They are eligible to apply whether they are part time or full time.



The guidance for PG applications is contained in the same publication as undergraduates.



The timing of application is as for undergraduates. Unlike most of the Research Councils, a student is able to apply to their LEA in the months before they start at university and have an assessment of their support requirements.



A new assessment of support requirements is needed before postgraduate research study. There are additional activities (see Section 4 of the preceding section) and these have to be taken into account when support requirements are assessed.



The DSA provided by LEAs are capped at a much lower level than for undergraduates; there is a strong likelihood that the DSA provided by an LEA will not cover the full costs of complex support requirements.



Universities have sometimes made up the shortfall through internal funding allocated for learning support (this will also be necessary in the case of international students who do not have LEA funding).

C. For students employed by the university as research associates/assistants and registered for a research degree

There needs to be an assessment of work-related support requirements **and** an assessment of learning support requirements.



Access to Work funding and DSA will cover work and learning support requirement costs. DSA will be provided by either the relevant research council or the student's LEA.

Part 4 - What are the support issues?

Disabled research students identified many issues which could prevent a disabled graduate embarking on research or successfully completing it. These are the main issues from pre-entry to completion: The highlighted words indicate sections of the Premia resources which relate to those issues.

1. Support to **write a research proposal**.
2. Accessible and transparent **information** about routes into research.
3. Clear information about **funding** mechanisms and procedures.
4. Inclusive postgraduate **admissions** procedures and practice.
5. Accessible **registration** process.
6. **Induction** programmes which include disability-related information and to which they have access - especially when funding to meet requirements has not been released in time.
7. **Training programmes** in research and generic skills which are inclusive and accessible.
8. Accommodation with access to the internet.
9. Availability of quiet research study rooms.
10. Responsive **research supervision** particularly in the early stages.
11. Understanding **research terminology**.
12. Support in **planning research**.
13. **Academics' perceptions** of a disabled research student.
14. Support in the extensive **reading** needed for research degree programmes.
15. Support in the planning and **writing of the thesis**.
16. Anticipation of support requirements in the research environment (all sections).
17. Access to **informal learning** environments.
18. Support in planning data collection/**fieldwork**.
19. Access to **conferences and academic networks**.
20. Support for PGR student's **role as teacher** of undergraduates/taught postgraduates.
21. An accessible **viva**.
22. **Careers** guidance and education which is responsive to the issues for disabled postgraduate research students.

Students talked too about the very positive role that disability services have played as advocates and facilitators. There is evidence that students find themselves isolated as researchers and isolated as disabled researchers. If key relationships with supervisors and others break down, then it is very difficult for students to manage complex workloads and complete.

I am also fortunate to have a brilliant disability advisor who is always there when I need advice. .. Without her support and humour, my life as a research postgraduate would be much tougher. She acts as a liaison between me and my department and/or research council. She is also a great sounding board. If I ever

have a problem or a worry she will listen and together we will arrive at a solution. I wish people knew that it's easy to make a difference and I wish people knew that solutions are easier to find if both parties are willing to find them.

PhD student with physical-mobility impairment

Part 5 - What's required and when?

As the issues are different in nature or emphasis from those at undergraduate level, it seems a good idea to look at the key points and the key research activities where intervention by a disability adviser may be needed.

Pre-entry

- Disabled postgraduate research students have talked about the major differences in the issues as from their undergraduate experience. A new assessment of requirements is needed to take account of the difference.
- Gather information from research supervisors/principle investigators about the additional elements of a postgraduate research degree programme: expected attendance at conferences, both national and international; teaching undergraduates and taught Masters students; fieldwork (collection of data); giving presentations. These will be needed by you, the student and the Access Centre carrying out the assessment of requirements. It is also very helpful if the students' supervisors are made aware of the nature and extent of support required, where, when and who will provide it, and ways in which they can provide support within supervision.
- Ensure that there are inclusive admissions policy and procedures in place for postgraduate research degree programmes, as well as for undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes. Sometimes PGR practices can vary within an institution.
- Check out with the student that their accommodation needs are being met by the university accommodation service; accommodation with Internet access is essential for some research students, particularly those who will be working at home a great deal.
- Make available information about funding to meet support requirements for a research degree: what is available, from whom and the application process.
- In anticipating requirements before the programme starts, clarify with the student, relevant academic and administrative staff the access issues including: access to any research team rooms; access to the informal

learning settings; supervision meeting rooms; office space and equipment used by the individual and/or the research team.

- Ensure accessible registration for PGR degree programme: it can involve different personnel and procedures from undergraduate registration and it may happen at several points in the year.
- Arrange for interim adjustments e.g. assistive technology until funding is in place. There is likely to be a significant delay if the student is funded by a research council as they usually can only apply after registration with the university.
- Plan with the student and their supervisor what to do if the student's DSA is insufficient to cover their requirements. This is more likely if the student does not receive research council funding (when the DSA is the same as at undergraduate level). If the student applies to their LEA for their postgraduate DSA, it is capped at a much lower level than the DSA awarded by Research Councils.

After registration

Funding

- If the student has not yet applied for DSA, prompt them to do that, ensuring that they are clear on the process and on what they will need to flag up with the Access Centre: conference attendance etc.
- Check what the student needs in place for their induction programme. On a short Masters by research course, where assessment criteria, research planning and methodology may be covered, it can be very detrimental if induction is not accessible. Induction for doctoral students includes core information about expectations, roles and research planning. For students whose DSA funding is not in place because, for example, of research councils' timescales or late recruitment, they may miss out on orientation into the research community. Equipment loan schemes, university funding or other interim measures may help to bridge the gap.

Access to support

- Students have talked about needing to know how to access support when they start at a different university on a PGR degree programme. It is a good idea for the disability service to be part of the induction programme so that students know how and where to access support.
- Students may register for research degrees at various points throughout the academic year. They may miss out on the information more readily

available at main registration and induction times. It is worth working with the information that is given out to those students and ensuring that access to disability services is signposted.

- Research and generic skills development programmes are very beneficial and often compulsory. They may be centrally provided by the university and/or within the relevant graduate school or faculty. They are also provided regionally and nationally by [UK GRAD](#). There is evidence that disabled students have found these particularly useful for networking and combating isolation.
- There may additionally be one-off sessions on specific methodologies or relevant software (SSPS, Minitab, for example). It is important that disabled students' requirements are met within those programmes and that you ask those providing the training to flag up sessions in good time so that arrangements can be put in place. Students talked about how much easier their research experience would have been had they had access to all skills development opportunities.

The Postgraduate Training Programme did include training and assessment on SSPS. I couldn't undertake it because at the time the University did not own any text enlarging or speech software. I was therefore exempted from this element of the course. Now that this is accessible, I'm in my final year and cannot allocate time to be trained.

Blind PhD student

Supervision

- The key people in the postgraduate research student's life are the research supervisors. The working relationship involves academic guidance; encouraging and giving feedback; enabling the student to remain focused and on target; monitoring and reviewing progress; preparing for the viva examination. The main supervisor will be the academic point of contact.
- It is a good idea to liaise from the outset with the main supervisor as well as the student. Students have talked about the value they attach to the disability adviser as advocate and intermediary.
- It is helpful if the research supervisor knows the type of support which may be provided by learning support staff. For example, if learning support includes proof-reading, that frees up the supervisors to feed back to the student on content, structure and clarity of argument.

- It is likely that the student will be involved in writing parts of the thesis from the outset. Learning support tutors will need to be clear about the planning and delivery of the thesis – milestones, timescales and external examination.

The viva

- The examination of the candidate through a viva is likely to be very different from any other forms of assessment the student has encountered. It is important that student, their main supervisor and you assess whether any adjustments to the viva will be needed.
 - External examiners are involved in the viva (and in the assessment of the thesis which precedes it) and they will need to be clear about any adjustments they will need to make.
 - If guidelines would be helpful, these will need to be circulated to the external examiners. (E.g. how to work with a BSL/English interpreter; the implications of the viva for a candidate with Asperger's syndrome.)
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Part 6 - Learning support with research students

The nature of learning support for a research degree student can be different in emphasis rather than approach. Issues of organisation, for example, can be about the shape and structure of the whole research process for a PhD rather than the management of several undergraduate assignments. Writing the thesis is on a different scale from a first degree dissertation but the support methods are similar. Here is the account of a dyslexia support tutor who has begun to work extensively with PGR students.

Postgraduate research students are obviously far more aware because they have a basis of undergraduate knowledge and skills. Even those who come to research MAs with limited experience of extended written work at undergraduate level have that intellectual capacity. They are more aware and switched on. They discuss, I think, at a higher level with you, even though they are struggling with the written element and sorting out their ideas. Certainly discussion is a key element in supporting postgraduate research students.

Usually the main issues seem to be: sorting out ideas, understanding the language of research, the differences (in level) from undergraduate to research ideas. But they have it all there; they just do not always know they have it there. Very often we talk it through, pulling out from conversations with them the key elements and presenting that back to them to say: 'Is this what you are talking about? Is this the focus?' And then you can see the light bulb going on and

they'll say yes. Then it is mind-mapping it or writing it down and I will usually be the person who does that.

This year the main purpose of the learning support has definitely been pulling out the structure and the focus of their research. The MA by research students have to write research dissertations and they do not believe they actually have the information there or even know what direction they are moving in. So it is teasing that out. Last year it was language and developing language. With the MA students teasing out the ideas is usually done in an hour, or an hour and a half. With PhD students it took 4 hours. But there was a lot involved in that. Some of the session was bit by bit planning and understanding the huge structure of a PhD. It was 4 hours with a break in the middle - two hours either side of intense discussion.

Their requirements, their questions are: What do I do with all this work, this research, these ideas? How do I put it into written format? How do I structure it? Usually they have been left to get on with it. One research student was just told to step up their skills but with no indication about how to do that. The other research students I have on the MA side are getting a lot of support which is good and I am just supplementing that. That has been by arrangement with the supervisors and the course leader.

The academic staff just recognised the issues as general disorganisation in the students' written work for the research elements. They could not provide the support at the level it was needed.

It's mainly structure and language. Stepping up and using a more specific research language or specific course related language. It's about using research language. They can grasp a definition and they know it. They understand the word on its own, but not how to use it in context.

When I am supporting a student with planning their thesis, I usually get them to tell me what their research is about; to outline the focus. Just to explain it so I understand a little bit about what they are trying to write about. That just helps me because usually they have everything everywhere and understanding the focus helps me to keep it pulled in. I usually just make notes as they are telling me a bit about their research. It involves going through and pulling out the key elements and then fitting that into what goes into the methodology, what is in the literature review. How does the literature review information relate to the research? It is linking it all together and making sure you have the forward and backward movement.

I gained my own knowledge of how to structure the thesis from reading a large number and analysing how they are put together.

I suppose they can pass their thesis to me for proofreading to me because it is not a supervisor, it's not a friend; it's a professional service provided by somebody who understands why they may have structured something in a bizarre way and can give sympathetic and constructive feedback. We are able to say what they should concentrate primarily on ...spelling errors, sentence structures, any inconsistencies. If they have written something inconsistent, it usually jumps out at you if they have failed to mention it before. I will flag it up and say: 'This strikes me as something you haven't mentioned before, or you are relating it to something that I can't see. Would you go back and just check that?'

Ideally, I will give feedback in a one-to-one session, just to talk through and find out if I have understood everything - because obviously it is not my area and I am not the supervisor. I talk through all the spelling errors and any inconsistencies that I pick up which I think could be a problem. If it is not clear what it means, I ask them to explain it to me and, by getting them to do that, usually they say straight away: 'Ah yes, that's right.'

I do write on their work; I try to use different colour pens. Most of them are not offended by red for errors, and I try to use green or another colour for other sort of comments or suggestions.

Supervisors have never challenged the support I offer. Our priorities as support tutors are to proof read, to look for grammar and spelling errors and inconsistencies in the text.

In the process of learning support you just see the growth in confidence. They realise their own potential. I think they come in feeling knocked down, that they are pretty average. Then when they get comments back, they realise that they can actually achieve and they jump up from an average performance to excellence.

A lot of students are anxious when they come in. We build up the sessions week by week and obviously they start to trust you. When they go out of the room, lots of students leave the door wide open. Sometimes you get the anxious backward glance and they whisper: 'Bye. See you next week.' The day they walk out and say, 'Right, great, fantastic, see you next week,' smile and shut the door is when I know it's worked.

Sandy Alden, Dyslexia Support Tutor at Newcastle University (Interviewed 2005)

Part 7 – The impact of research on disabled students

One of the issues raised by a counsellor who has extensive experience of working with doctoral students was that there can be an overestimation of levels of confidence by others, even those who are used to working with disabled students. Other people's perception can be that these are bright, highly competent and independent learners. So a word or two of affirmation will see them through the PhD journey.

Self-esteem

What the counsellor has frequently encountered are students with exceptionally low self-esteem whose success in education has little impact on their perception of their abilities. Students may have no confidence in their worth as members of the academic community. They can even feel that they are there by default. Yet they will be expected to undertake some or all of the following: giving a presentation to their peers; teaching undergraduates; networking with academics in their research subject; going to conferences where they will know no-one; telephoning a key research director at another institution; presenting a paper at an international conference; writing an article for publication.

Skills ownership

Fears of undertaking these activities can be openly expressed to the supervisor or to a disability adviser. But those fears may be more indirectly expressed by a reluctance to participate in networking and presentations, repeatedly missing deadlines, what may appear to be delaying tactics. It is vital that supervisors and learning support tutors work with the student to raise confidence. Enabling students to manage their research in smaller stages can build confidence gradually. We need to make sure that feedback is delivered in an unthreatening way, that success is affirmed and weaknesses placed in the context of strengths. These are not token adjustments to practice. They can be the actions which will enable a student to complete and to move on to employment. We cannot afford to lose outstanding talent because the talent is owned by someone who finds it difficult to believe they have talent.

Team of support

A coordinated response from research supervisors, generic skills trainers, disability advisers and learning support tutors is essential. If additional help is needed, then students can be referred for counselling to work with the issues behind their low self-esteem and to develop tools to dismantle the barriers. That specialist support, however, is more likely to work if the student finds the message of their value reinforced by academic staff.

We also need to recognise that not all research students will have the ability to build relationships which is vital to networking. They may continue to require support in making links with people within the research community.

As Taylor and Beasley state in *A Handbook for Doctoral Supervisors (2005)*:

Historically, as Johnson et al. (2000) have argued, 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

Section 17 Disability advisers – supporting research students (Amended February 2007) These resources are outcomes of the Premia project based at Newcastle University (2003 – 06) and funded by HEFCE.