

## Support guidelines for disabled Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs)

### Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	2
<b>2. Accessing support</b> .....	3
<b>3. Key Contacts and responsibilities</b> .....	4
3.1 Supervisors.....	4
3.2 School Disability Coordinator (SDC) .....	5
3.3 Student Advice & Support .....	5
<b>4. Support for Disabled PGR Students</b> .....	5
4.1 Provisions .....	5
4.2 Financial Support .....	6
4.3 Specialist Mentor Support .....	7
4.4 Accessible venues: .....	7
4.5 Academic Writing.....	7
4.6 Fieldwork: .....	7
4.7 PGR Assessment:.....	8
4.8 General PGR support.....	8

## 1. Introduction

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

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

This document provides guidance for disabled PGRs on the support and processes in place to ensure they can effectively conduct their postgraduate research and complete assessments, including the *viva voce*. Guidance for staff supporting disabled PGRs can be found in the University's [Academic Quality Handbook](#).

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

**Key information from this guidance document can also be accessed in the [Disabled Student Pathway](#).**

## **2. Accessing support**

PGRs are advised to inform the University that they are disabled if they require support in their PGR programme for disability-related reasons. It is recommended that PGRs share this information as early as possible, ideally in advance of commencing their research degree, as early notification provides the best opportunity for the University to work with students to ensure they are supported effectively to participate in their PGR programme. PGRs are welcome to [contact Student Advice & Support](#) for a confidential discussion about sharing they are disabled and the support available at the University.

Student Advice & Support do not routinely share the nature of a student's health condition, impairment, or specific learning difference (SpLD) with supervisors and support staff unless it is essential for the provision of the required support. If a PGR would like this information to be shared, they should let Student Advice & Support know. If a PGR thinks it would be useful for staff to be aware of particular information about them, they are also encouraged to share this with staff directly.

Disabled PGRs are asked to provide evidence to support the long-term provision of support. The following link provides further information: [Disability Services | Students | The University of Aberdeen \(abdn.ac.uk\)](#).

### **New students**

The application for admission provides applicants with the opportunity to share they are disabled. In line with the [Admissions Policy](#), the University makes the reassurance that a disability will not affect the outcome of an application.

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

### **Current Students**

In cases where a PGR shares they are disabled and/or has a SpLD identified, or wished to be shared, partway through a degree, PGRs are encouraged to make their supervisory team aware and to contact Student Advice & Support as early as possible, to discuss support provisions. PGRs can be assured that any information will be treated positively and confidentially and will not be shared without the student's permission. This includes to supervisors, examiners, sponsors, and funders. If a PGR chooses not to share, this may limit the type of support that can be put in place.

## Pathway to support

The following pathway provides a detailed overview of how disabled PGRs can access support. The steps and staff involved are also summarised below.

### Step 1:

- PGRs can inform the University they are disabled and/or have a SpLD during the application process.
- PGRs should [complete the online form](#) supplied by the University or [make contact](#) with Student Advice & Support to discuss their disability-related study/research support needs.

### Step 2:

- PGR to meet with Student Advice & Support to explore, identify, and assess research-related support needs.
- Provisions will be discussed and agreed for the individual and within the context of the research project, often in collaboration with relevant members of staff such as the supervisory team.
- Provisions are shared securely with the relevant members of staff via the School Disability Coordinator (SDC) who can facilitate implementing the agreed measures, including adjustments to work environments.

### Step 3:

- Where appropriate and if an individual is eligible, Student Advice & Support will facilitate a Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) application.

## 3. Key Contacts and responsibilities

### 3.1 Supervisors

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

Once a disabled PGR speaks with Student Advice & Support and provisions are identified, their supervisor will receive the provisions (where the PGR has agreed to share) and will discuss with the PGR at the initial supervisory meeting how these will be implemented and any changes to the research project. Supervisory meetings should be used as an opportunity for a PGR to raise any queries or share changes to any disability-related study/research support requirements with their supervisors.

Supervisors will review the proposed research project at the start of the research degree and at structured review points, taking into consideration the provisions in place to ensure

the PGR is supported appropriately to conduct research, learning and assessment. In addition, supervisors will outline to the PGR the requirements for key progression assessments and final examination of a research degree, as per [the General Regulations for Research Degrees](#) and to ensure provisions are in place to support the PGR in completing these. However, the PGR must also be aware of the key progression assessments and final examination of a research degree.

If concerns arise, a discussion can be coordinated by either the PGR and/or supervisor with Student Advice & Support and the SDC to ensure there is mutual understanding of any disability-related study/research provisions, what this means for undertaking the research, and for receiving information, feedback and sharing in discussions of research.

### **3.2 School Disability Coordinator (SDC)**

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

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

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

### **3.3 Student Advice & Support**

Student Advice & Support provides advice, information, and practical study-related support to all disabled students. When a student contacts Student Advice & Support, an initial discussion and assessment of study-related needs will be arranged. Student Advice & Support will provide advice, and recommend provisions appropriate to the PGR's experience of studying/researching. Any provisions will be communicated to the supervisory team via the SDCs.

## **4. Support for Disabled PGR Students**

### **4.1 Provisions**

Provisions can support PGRs to navigate the demands of a research degree and will be put in place following the initial assessment, or follow up meetings, with Student Advice & Support and after consideration of medical and/or SpLD evidence. The following link

provides information about the evidence required in order for provisions to be implemented long-term at the University: [Disability Services | Students | The University of Aberdeen \(abdn.ac.uk\)](#).

Although provisions will be applied on a case by case basis and are unique to the individual and their PGR journey, and their specific research project, a general guide to provisions, including provisions for PGRs, is available at [Disability Services | Students | The University of Aberdeen \(abdn.ac.uk\)](#).

It is the PGR's responsibility to meet with Student Advice & Support prior to any upcoming progression assessment and/or final examination of a research degree to discuss changes to provisions, if required.

PGRs can view the provisions which have been implemented by Student Advice & Support, and communicated to supervisors and support staff, in the personal details section of the StudentHub. Students' provisions will remain in place unless Student Advice & Support agree changes with them. Students can request a provisions review in the StudentHub or by contacting Student Advice & Support on 01224 273 935 or at [student.support@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:student.support@abdn.ac.uk).

If a PGR feels that their provisions are not being effectively delivered by the School, they can raise this with the relevant SDC(s); please see the following link for their contact details: [Disability Services | Students | The University of Aberdeen \(abdn.ac.uk\)](#)

## **4.2 Financial Support**

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **4.3 Specialist Mentor Support**

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

### **4.4 Accessible venues**

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

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

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

### **4.5 Academic Writing**

All PGRs can access writing support through the Student Learning Service and disabled PGRs may be referred for specialist study skills support coordinated by Student Advice & Support. If identified as a reasonable adjustment with Student Advice & Support, PGRs may receive access to proof reading support which sits out with the University's [Policy on Proofreading](#). Where there is a confidentiality agreement or IP contract in place, this must be disclosed by the PGR to Student Advice & Support who will coordinate the proof-reading support with the School Disability Coordinators.

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

### **4.6 Fieldwork**

Many PGRs will undertake fieldwork as part of their research project and as with research projects, all fieldwork experiences are unique. Provisions to support fieldwork will be highly project specific and informed by any ethical requirements and risk assessments. Any provisions must be agreed in advance of any fieldwork activity with the supervisory team,

the PGR **and** the SDC(s). Student Advice & Support may also be consulted on adjustments for fieldwork.

#### 4.7 PGR Assessment

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### 4.8 General PGR support

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

- Development, implementation, and advice on institutional policies, processes, and guidance to support postgraduate research and researchers.
- Student and supervisor development and skills training
- Advice on PGR stipends (including sick pay)



- Advice and processing changes to PGR study (e.g., absences including suspensions, extensions)
- General support for PGRs and supervisors

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

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

Updated -December 2023