

Reasonable Adjustments and Support for PGR Level Assessment/Examination

This document closely reflects the procedures outlined by our Research Degree Accrediting partners, the University of Leeds (UoL)

Page 3 of this document includes new guidance on reasonable adjustments for a video-streamed (online) transfer of final viva – in response to the Covid-19. Annex II (page 7) provides details of the training and support available.

Introduction

There are two formal assessment/examination points for PGRs:

- The transfer stage (end of Year 1 for a full-time PhD student).
- The final oral examination after submission of the thesis.

The University is experienced in supporting disabled PGRs through these assessment/examination processes. This is always done on a case-by-case basis; in consultation with Disability Services, the individual PGR, a nominated supervisor(s) (if desired by the PGR) and their academic School. The following sets out the process¹ for identifying and agreeing support and adjustments for these assessment points.

These arrangements ensure that reasonable adjustments are made, in accordance with the agreed Learning Support Plan (LSP), to the transfer viva/oral examination so that disabled and/or dyslexic PGRs are not disadvantaged by the process for transfer/examination. The same academic standards for the transfer to/award of the particular research degree must be upheld.

It is important to note that, the transfer assessment and the final oral examination for PGRs are very different from assessments at Undergraduate/Taught Programme (UG/TP) level. It may be necessary to identify alternative strategies to those utilised

¹ Advice on adjustments/support during the candidature is available on the [website](#) & from Disability Services.

at UG/TP level for reasons that are central to the particular assessment/examination requirements at PGR level.

Background to the assessment points for PGRs

Purpose of the transfer assessment

The assessment at the transfer stage is intended to identify whether the individual PGR, and their research project, have the *potential* for success at doctoral level; and also whether completion of a thesis within the standard period of study for the programme is a reasonable expectation. The process consists of a written submission by the PGR followed by a viva with a transfer assessment panel.

Purpose of the final oral examination

The role of the oral examination is to ensure that the thesis reaches the University standards for the degree (in terms of the [criteria for award and learning outcomes](#)) and that the thesis has been written and is understood by the PGR. It also gives the PGR the opportunity to answer questions in areas where the examiners are not satisfied. Where the evidence in the thesis is not compelling, the examiners must use the oral examination to encourage the PGR to provide convincing evidence that the stated criteria for award can be met. Some examiners will also wish to satisfy themselves of the candidate's general level of understanding in the subject area. The process consists of a thesis submission by the PGR followed by an oral examination with the team of examiners (normally one internal and one external examiner) as set out in more detail in the [Guide to the thesis examination process](#).

Examples of support arrangements/reasonable adjustments – SEE ANNEX I

The University has a series of support arrangements/reasonable adjustments which can be agreed between Disability Services, the PGR, a nominated supervisor(s) (if desired by the PGR), and the academic School and put in place without the need for approval from the LTU Research and Knowledge Exchange Office (RKEO) through UoL. These are outlined in sections A & B of Annex I. Where it is identified that the examples in sections A & B are insufficient, or if alternative adjustments are being considered or requested, these should be forwarded to the UoL Doctoral College Operations (DCO) normally by the Director of PGR (DoPGR) Studies through the LTU RKEO. This should take place after discussion between Disability Services, the PGR, a nominated supervisor(s) (if desired by the PGR), and the DoPGR. The UoL DCO will arrange for the recommended adjustments to be considered at University level. Examples are given in Section C.

Recommended timescales for identifying support/reasonable adjustments

There are time limits for the assessment/examination and it is therefore important that the need for reasonable adjustments is identified well in advance of the transfer and viva process to allow due consideration to be given prior to assessment/examination. Schools need to ensure they are aware of students who have declared a disability to the University and work in partnership with students, and Disability Services where required, to identify when reasonable adjustments may be required for the transfer and viva processes; and what those reasonable adjustments might be. It is recommended that discussions about any reasonable adjustments for the assessment points should begin as follows:

Transfer viva: as part of the first formal progress review point (approx. month 6 of full-time study) which will be 3-6 months prior to the expected transfer viva date.

Final viva: as part of the examination entry process (at least 3 months before thesis submission) which will be 4-6 months prior to the expected viva date.

Any adjustments that can be put in place at School-level can be confirmed. **Any adjustments which require University-level consideration through UoL DCO should be submitted to the DCO at least 2 months before the expected transfer viva/final viva date.**

Process for facilitating agreed reasonable adjustments

The Research Office is responsible for communicating any agreed adjustments and support arrangements to the PGR, the transfer panel members/team of examiners (this includes adjustments agreed locally and any adjustments which have been approved). The Chair/Independent Assessor of the transfer assessment panel or the Internal Examiner has responsibility for facilitating on the day any reasonable adjustments to the transfer viva/oral examination, which will have been agreed upon in advance.

Reasonable adjustments for a video-streamed (online) transfer of final viva, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic

It is recognised that the online format of the transfer or final viva might present additional barriers to disabled and/or dyslexic PGRs. Previously agreed adjustments around the transfer or final viva must be honoured, but bespoke arrangements may be required in some cases. PGRs are advised to contact Disability Services at the earliest opportunity to discuss the reasonable adjustments and/or additional support that may be needed for an online transfer or final viva.

Microsoft Teams is the preferred platform that will normally be used for a transfer or final viva. As a tool, Microsoft Teams is accessible to most PGRs, but there are

some practical accessibility issues that may make it more difficult for some disabled PGRs. For example, consideration may need to be given to:

- Whether any required assistive technology is compatible.
- Facilitating access to British Sign Language Interpreter.
- Whether lip reading or subtitle will work effectively.
- Difficulties with the practical navigation of screens and reliance on audio.
- Additional anxiety at 'inviting in' strangers to a personal space (e.g. home)
- A need for breaks.
- The attendance of a supporter. In order to ensure that online viva process is accessible, the following may need to be considered:
- Previously agreed adjustments around the viva must be honoured.
- PGRs must have access to any assistive technology agreed under Annex I (section C).
- PGRs must be informed well in advance of the software platform to be used for the viva (normally Microsoft Teams). This will provide the opportunity to test the platform, navigation and support arrangements ahead of the viva, and to identify and resolve any issues in advance. Any difficulties should be noted for discussion between Disability Services, the PGR and the Supervisor to explore solutions and adjustments.
- Training and support is available to all PGRs, as set out in Annex II of this document, including the opportunity for a mock Teams viva through the RKEO and/or the supervisors.
- A period of time must be allowed at the start of the viva for all parties to become familiar with the environment and ensure they are comfortable with the technology and set-up before commencing the viva.
- Careful consideration should be given to the use of breaks. Online meetings may take longer and can be more tiring than face-to-face meetings. It might be necessary to agree pre-arranged break times (e.g. 10 minutes every hour) and/or to have breaks available on request. It is not necessary for the PGR to remain in the room or on camera during a break period.
- The remote viva policy indicates the PGR will need to be alone during the examination. However, as set out in Annex I – section C of this document, it continues to be possible for a PGR to be accompanied by a supporter, if agreed as part of any reasonable adjustments. The supporter may be in the room with the PGR, or join the viva remotely, as appropriate.
- It might help to provide familiarity with those involved in the viva before via (for example) recent photographs or informal pre-viva video introductions to those involved, or blurring the background on the call.
- It is possible to request that the viva be postponed and rearranged in the more traditional face to face format, when these become practical again. If a PGR will be unable to complete the assessment by video streaming the LTU RKEO is asked to contact the progress and exams team in UoL DCO.

ANNEX I

Examples of support & reasonable adjustments for PGR level assessment/examination

Section A - Reminder of support covered by the good practice guidance

The following can be agreed between Disability Services, the PGR, a nominated supervisor(s) (if desired by the PGR), and the academic School without the need for prior approval. The examples listed here are covered by the good practice [guidance to examiners on the conduct of the viva](#) and [Additional examiners information](#) and the [guide for transfer panels](#) which allow for – as standard for all PGRs – the following:

- Wherever possible, assessors/examiners using succinct and focussed questions and avoiding the use of multi-part questions.
- Thinking time before answering questions
- Asking for a question to be repeated/re-phrased or requesting clarification
- Being able to consult your own copy of the thesis/submission
- Breaks during the viva
- Proof-reading of the transfer/thesis submission

It may be helpful to note that the University does not have specific regulations regarding the length of the oral examination/transfer viva - it should be 'open-ended' and last as long as it needs to. Therefore requests for additional time can be easily accommodated within the assessment/examination procedures.

Section B - Other examples of routine adjustments which do not require committee approval

The following adjustments can be agreed between Disability Services, the PGR, a nominated supervisor(s) (if desired by the PGR), and the academic School without the need for prior approval.

- Optional rest breaks pre-scheduled at e.g. x minute intervals and/or the opportunity to request breaks
- Advance briefing for the Panel/Examiners on the particular nature of the disability (for example to explain communication and thinking style)
- PGR providing a presentation to the panel/examiners at the start or end of the viva
- Particular room requirements e.g. accessible room, lighting, seating & furniture arrangements
- Providing materials in alternative formats

- PGR afforded (reasonable) time to write down questions posed by the panel/examiners
- The use of a British Sign Language interpreter

Section C - Examples of adjustments which require committee approval

Any recommended adjustments not covered by the guidance in A or B above should be forwarded to the UoL Doctoral College by the LTU Research Office in the first instance to be considered at University level (by the UoL Graduate Board). These must be proposed in good time to allow due consideration to be given prior to assessment/examination.

Any adjustments requiring University-level consideration should be forwarded at least 2 months before the expected transfer viva/final viva date.

There are time limits for the assessment/examination and failure to submit a request for an adjustment within a reasonable timescale may result in the University being unable to accommodate the request.

Examples of adjustments which will be considered on a case-by-case basis through the RKEO and DoPGR:

- Presence of a supporter/support worker/note taker at a viva
- Presence of a Specialist Mentor to assist communication at a viva
- Use of assistive technology in the viva
- An extension to the deadline for submission of the transfer report or thesis.²
- An extension to the period for corrections (after the viva) where the thesis has been recommended for award of the degree subject to minor corrections.

² Further advice can be found in the [Policy on suspensions and extensions](#)

ANNEX II

Training and support in preparation for the transfer assessment/final viva

PGRs should consult their supervisor(s) and the training resources for appropriate guidance in preparation for their transfer and final viva. A “mock viva” may be helpful for some PGRs. Where this would be beneficial the PGR should discuss this with their Supervisor to arrange this.

Training and support in preparation for a video streamed final or transfer viva using Teams

PGRs may be working for long hours in the same working space and should consider guidance on how to manage their space and time effectively to support their wellbeing.

It can, understandably, be an anxious time as you approach your final doctoral viva or transfer. If you are also unfamiliar with video streaming and you find you now have a video streamed viva, again understandably, this can add to the anxiety. Guidance on the Viva generally is available through the PHR training schedule. A number of video streamed Vivas have now successfully taken place.

Guidance on how to use MS Teams is available through the My LTU online application (app).

Other sources of information

There are also a number of other sources of information which PGRs might find it helpful to consult in preparation for their transfer or final viva:

- All PGRs should, at an early stage in their candidature, ensure they are aware of the criteria for award of the research degree programme for which they are registered. This is the criteria that will be used by the examiners when examining the thesis at the final examination stage. At the transfer stage the assessors will be considering the potential for this criteria to be met. The requirements and learning outcomes for research degrees are provided in the [Ordinance and Regulation and Programmes of Study](#).
- After the transfer viva and the final viva the assessors/examiners must produce a joint report which outlines their recommendation. All PGRs might find it helpful to look at the [Joint Report of the Transfer Assessment Panel](#)⁵ or the final [examiners' report form](#) which describes the criteria against which the assessors/examiners will be assessing their work.
- The [Guide to the thesis examination process](#) provides an overview of the thesis examination process and sets out the University's requirements for the

presentation of theses and offers advice about the different stages of the process, including advice about the final viva.

- The [Research Degrees Handbook](#) provides further information about the transfer process.
- The University provides all assessors/examiners with procedural details on the conduct of the viva and PGRs may also find it helpful to consult this advice when preparing for their viva. For the final viva please see [the Instructions to Examiners document](#). For the transfer viva please see the [Guidelines for the transfer process](#) document in the research degrees handbook.