

A2.3

Inclusion at the University of Worcester



Teach inclusively Being inclusive in Supervising Postgraduate Researchers

The Higher Education Academy is clear that the Descriptors of the UK Professional Standards Framework can be interpreted in terms of doctoral supervision. It has produced guidance on how doctoral supervisors can provide evidence for their engagement with the Framework: <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/download/uk-professional-standards-framework-ukpfs-dimensions-framework-doctoral-supervisors>.

What?

Foster a culture of inclusion (See also [Creating Inclusive Learning and Teaching Environments](#)).

How?

Ask PGR students whether they anticipate any particular barriers or concerns with study from the outset, taking a holistic view of the PGR student's situation. Ensure relevant factors are passed on to others in the supervisory team. Encourage PGR students to contact the Disability and Dyslexia Service (<https://www2.worc.ac.uk/disabilityanddyslexia/>), Firstpoint (<https://www.worcester.ac.uk/life/help-and-support/>), or attend a student mental health drop-in, where appropriate (<https://www2.worc.ac.uk/counselling/>).

Why?

This approach demonstrates a willingness to appreciate difference and gives PGR students an opportunity to talk about disability or other issues that may be relevant. This guidance on supporting disabled researchers may also help (<https://www.vitae.ac.uk/doing-research/every-researcher-counts-equality-and-diversity-in-researcher-careers/resources-and-support-for-disabled-researchers/supervising-disabled-researchers/supervising-disabled-researchers>). PGRs should feel comfortable talking about any issues in a positive context, rather than being made to feel excluded or awkward.

Reflect on your experience and practice (see also [Developing Inclusive Practices](#)).

Recognise that individuals will have a range of thinking and learning styles, as well as differing motivations for undertaking a Research Degree. Take an open-minded approach and be prepared to adapt to different ways of doing things.

Dyslexic PGR students, for example, may prefer to map out ideas visually, using mind maps, rather than in a linear format in the initial stages. Visually impaired or blind PGRs may opt to verbally describe, rather than provide diagrams or graphics.



What?

Be aware of cultural norms.

How?

Be aware that the cultural background of a PGR student may affect the student-supervisor working relationship.

Why?

PGR students from some cultures may take a less critical approach to analysis than is expected in the UK context^{1,2} and may be unused to questioning the ideas of those in supervisory roles.³

Work out the best strategies for keeping notes and agreeing actions from meetings.

Discuss how a disability might impact on note-taking in supervisions. Enable PGR students to concentrate on engaging in discussion and consider allowing audio recording of meetings, or provide a bullet-pointed record.⁴ Agree on any actions at the end of the meeting so that you both have a shared understanding.

Difficulties with memory, concentration, dexterity or other SpLDs may all impact on the ability to listen and take notes concurrently, meaning that the act of taking notes may impact on the quality of the discussion. People on the autism spectrum can take a very literal interpretation of language.

Support PGR students with developing planning skills.

The lack of structure inherent to PGR study can be challenging for many, and contribute to feelings of isolation and a lack of sense of achievement. Assistance with identifying shorter-term and interim goals may be necessary in some cases.⁵

This can be problematic for PGR students with mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression, and may exacerbate these. Difficulty with planning and time estimation are common to students with mental health difficulties, and for students with specific learning difficulties (SpLDs) such as dyslexia and dyspraxia⁶.

Be aware of PGR student's mental wellbeing.

Undertaking a research degree can be an isolating experience.⁷ Encourage PGR students to attend the regular mental-health drop-ins (<https://www2.worc.ac.uk/counselling/>) if they have any concerns about this.

Lack of confidence, uncertainty and isolation can all have an impact on mental wellbeing. During different stages of the process a fear of criticism of ideas can be compounded by insecurities around linguistic abilities, literacy difficulties, educational background and academic writing style.

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What?

Recognise that reading is more challenging for some PGR students.

How?

If disabled PGR students use assistive software to access written text, ask them to demonstrate this or try it out yourself to fully understand the process.

Why?

This can be useful in trying to understand working methods and time constraints, especially when texts include diagrams, which can be tricky to navigate using screen reading software. The student may also have difficulty accessing journals in the right format.

Mark for content on draft work.

Provide feedback on the content of written work and the quality of the ideas, rather than focusing on issues with technical accuracy. Refer to University assessment policy (<https://www2.worc.ac.uk/aqu/documents/AssessmentPolicy.pdf>) for clarification on correct assessment practice.

Students with SpLDs, and students whose first language is not English many find it demoralising to have these weaknesses in written work repeatedly highlighted.

Facilitate engagement.

Consider whether there are social and environmental barriers to engagement opportunities, particularly if the PGR student's disability makes working in shared offices difficult.

Engagement with peers is an important part of the PGR experience and peer relationships can help to prevent isolation. Fostering an inclusive environment and encouraging students to spend time together helps these relationships to form.

Manage expectations around fieldwork (see also [Being Inclusive in Fieldtrips](#)).

Assist PGR students in thinking through the activities, logistics and time scales of any proposed fieldwork taking into account any constraints the student has.

Supervisors will have more experience of such activities and be able to ensure the PGR student has a realistic idea of what this will involve and whether it will be achievable for them.



What?

Understand reasonable adjustments.

How?

If supervising a disabled PGR student refer to refer to the University guide 'Staff guidance for inclusive assessment & making reasonable adjustments' (https://www2.worc.ac.uk/aqu/documents/Staff_Guidance_for_inclusive_assessments_web_version_Jan_2021.pdf), University Policy and Procedures for Inclusive Assessment and Reasonable Adjustments (https://www2.worc.ac.uk/aqu/documents/Inclusive_Assessment_Policy.pdf) and University Assessment Policy (<https://www2.worc.ac.uk/aqu/documents/AssessmentPolicy.pdf>), to ensure compliance when designing inclusive assessments.

Why?

Talking through possible adjustments at an early stage will help alleviate some of the anxiety involved in preparing for a Viva.

1 Wisker, G., Robinson, G. and Shacham, M. (2007). 'Postgraduate research success: Communities of practice involving cohorts, guardian supervisors and online communities.' *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*. 44(3), pp.301-320. doi: 10.1080/14703290701486720

2 Shaheen, N. (2016) 'International students' critical thinking-related problem areas: UK university teachers' perspectives.' *Journal of Research in International Education* Vol. 15(1) pp. 18–31.

3 Melles, G. 2005. 'Supervising international undergraduate medical students'. *Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia – conference paper*. [Online]. [Accessed 11 November 2016]. <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.3/45663>

4 Farrar, V. and Young, R.G. 2007. *Supervising disabled research students. Issues in postgraduate education: Management, teaching and supervision*. London: Society for Research into Higher Education.

5 Vitae. 2015. *Strategies to support planning and organisation for disabled researchers*. [Online]. [Accessed 4 September 2018]. Available from: <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/doing-research/every-researcher-counts-equality-and-diversity-in-researcher-careers/resources-and-support-for-disabled-researchers/supervising-disabled-researchers/strategies-to-support-planning-and-organisation-for-disabled-researchers>

6 School of Advanced Study Guidance on supporting disabled students for teaching staff [Online] [Accessed 4 September 2018] Available from: <https://www.sas.ac.uk/sites/default/files/files/Policies/SAS%20Guidance%20for%20Learning%20and%20Teaching.pdf>

7 Eley, A. and Jennings, R. 2005. *Effective Postgraduate Supervision*. Maidenhead: Open University Press

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<https://inclusiveteaching.leeds.ac.uk/>; <https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/your-university/teaching-and-learning/inclusivity>.

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