

## Reasonable adjustments and support for PGR level assessment/examination

### 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 Disabled Students Assessment and Support (DSAS), the individual PGR and their academic School. The following sets out the process for identifying and agreeing support and adjustments for these assessment points<sup>1</sup>. These arrangements ensure that reasonable adjustments are made to the transfer viva/oral examination so that disabled 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 UG/TP level. It may be necessary to identify alternative strategies to those utilised 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 (as defined in each Faculty's [protocol](#)) 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](#).

Annex II of this document sets out the sources of training and support all PGRs can access in preparation for their transfer assessment and final viva.

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<sup>1</sup> Advice on adjustments/support during the candidature is available on the [website](#) & from DSAS.

## Examples of support arrangements/reasonable adjustments – SEE ANNEX I

The University has a series of support arrangements/reasonable adjustments which can be agreed between DSAS, the PGR and the academic School and put in place without the need for approval from the Graduate Board's Programmes of Study and Audit Group (PSAG) or Examinations Group (GBEG). 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 Postgraduate Research and Operations (PGR&O) normally by the Postgraduate Research Tutor, after discussion between DSAS, the PGR and School. PGR&O will arrange for the recommended adjustments to be considered at University level (by PSAG or GBEG on behalf of the Graduate Board). 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 DSAS 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/Faculty-level can be confirmed. **Any adjustments which require University-level consideration should be submitted to PGR&O at least 2 months before the expected transfer viva/final viva date.**

## Process for facilitating agreed reasonable adjustments

The School 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 by PSAG/GBEG). 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.

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

### A Reminder of support covered by the good practice guidance

The following can be agreed between DSAS, the PGR and the academic School without the need for prior approval by PSAG or GBEG. The examples listed here are covered by the good practice [guidance to examiners on the conduct of the viva](#) 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<sup>2</sup>

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.

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

The following adjustments can be agreed between DSAS, the PGR and the academic School without the need for prior approval by PSAG or GBEG.

- 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

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<sup>2</sup> The University's proof reading policy does not apply to the research component of a research degree programme (i.e. the transfer report, final thesis).

## 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 PGR & Operations in the first instance to be considered at University level (by PSAG or GBEG<sup>3</sup> on behalf of the 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 by the Chair of PSAG or GBEG include:

- 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<sup>4</sup>.
- 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<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> In practice this will normally be the Chair acting on behalf the relevant Group.

<sup>4</sup> Further advice can be found in the [Policy on suspensions and extensions](#)

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

PGRs should consult their supervisor(s) 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.

### Transfer and final viva preparation workshops

A range of support is available to those nearing the transfer assessment / final examination through the [Graduate Training and Support Centre](#) which offers training and development opportunities for postgraduate researchers. Full details are available on their [website](#), but Workshops include:

- ‘Preparing for your transfer’ – provides a guide to the process and expectations, including the transfer requirements of the University, your Faculty and School, guidelines for the written component, and typical Viva areas of questioning
- ‘The Final Stages of your Research and Thesis Presentation’ – Includes guidance on the format regulations for thesis, eThesis and copyright issues, the process to submission and the options open to examiners following the viva.
- ‘Preparing for your Doctoral Viva’ – Reviews the purpose of the final viva, the viva format and associated regulations, types of questions and an opportunity for participants to practice in responding to typical Viva areas of questioning.

### 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 Regulations 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](#)<sup>5</sup> or the final [examiners’](#)

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<sup>5</sup> The completed report must be uploaded to the PDR after the transfer viva and can be accessed by the PGR at this point.

[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 [SES website](#) provides further information about the transfer process. The exact procedures for the transfer assessment may vary between individual Faculties/Schools according to the requirements of the different disciplines. PGRs should contact their Faculty/School for guidance on the transfer process and the arrangements specific to their Faculty.
- The University provides all assessors/examiners with good practice advice 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](#)