Guide for Examiners

Disabled PGR students

Disabled PGR students, like all students at the University of Leeds, are protected by law from discrimination arising out of their disability. The Equality Act 2010 defines a disabled person (someone who has the protected characteristic of disability) as someone who has a physical and/or mental impairment which has what the law calls 'a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities'. The University of Leeds, and those acting on its behalf, have a legal obligation to ensure that no disabled student is treated less favourably than a non-disabled student, and that reasonable adjustments are made so that they are not placed at a substantial disadvantage compared to other students for a reason relating to their disability.

Vivas, orals and presentations may place some disabled students at a substantial disadvantage, for example students who work with a sign-language interpreter, students who have short term memory difficulties, students who are blind and use assistive software, students who have Asperger Syndrome or other social communication differences. Where a viva, oral or presentation is essential to assess the necessary competence standards there is still a requirement to make reasonable adjustments to the process.

The range for adjustments that can be made to the viva is as diverse as the range of disabilities experienced across the student body. Every disabled student will experience their disability differently, and for this reason it is impossible to provide blanket guidance for the types of reasonable adjustment that can be made to the viva.

However, as a starting point it can be useful to determine what is being assessed through the viva, and what is not being assessed through this method. The University publishes its own guidance on the definition of the purpose of oral examinations, which should be read in conjunction with the information given below. The University’s guidance can be found here: http://www.leeds.ac.uk/rsa/thesissubmissionandexamination/staff/instructions.html.

What is being assessed in the viva?

The viva assesses a student’s ability:

- To place their research in the broader context;
- To understand the strengths and limitations of their thesis;
- To identify its contribution to knowledge;
- To show detailed knowledge of the thesis;
- To prove that the work is their own.

What is not being examined in the viva

A viva should not assess:

- The power of a student’s memory to recall accurately all the details of their thesis;
• The student’s fluency at spoken English – although clearly it is essential to communicate about their work with interest, understanding of subject language and knowledge;
• The student’s ability to endure a lengthy ordeal;
• The student’s ability to interpret a complicated process and any unnecessarily formal language;
• The student’s capacity for reading non-verbal signals and esoteric humour;
• The student’s lack of fear, or level of self-confidence.

The Disability Team works closely with students, supervisors and examiners to ensure that reasonable adjustments are made to the viva process so that disabled students are not substantially disadvantaged, but so that academic standards are upheld. Where a student has undertaken an Assessment of Study Need, specific information regarding the viva and any adjustments which need to be made should be made available to the examiners via the School Disability Contact, or the student’s supervisor.

Premia guidelines for viva examiners
The HEFCE-funded Premia project looking into support for disabled PGR students has led to the creation of a resource base aimed at supporting disabled PGR students, and those working with them. It includes a section on making vivas accessible, which can be found here: http://www.vitae.ac.uk/CMS/files/upload/Premia-section-15-(staff)-an-accessible-viva-2010.pdf

For viva examiners, the following guidance from Premia may be useful:
1. When informed of the type of adjustments required for a disabled candidate in their viva, and the reasons for these adjustments, analyse the practical and academic implications of those adjustments.

2. Relay promptly any concerns about the validity or practicality of the adjustments to the viva coordinator, who will discuss these with the Disability Team.

3. Is it clear what is expected of the examiners? Is there sufficient information for the adjustments to be made confidently?

4. If further information, advice, guidance or training is required, contact the viva coordinator. Specify what is needed: briefing notes, evidence, detail of what is expected of examiners, briefing session or awareness training, meeting of the panel prior to the viva etc.