

Case Study Title: Not forgetting...Inclusive assessment for research postgraduates

Your Name: Claire Garden

Institution: Edinburgh Napier University

Subject area: Life Sciences

Programme/Course: PhD and MRes

Module/Unit: N/A

SCQF Level: 12

Assessment Name: viva and thesis

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1. How would you summarise your practice case study?

I share options for alternative assessment and reasonable adjustment for research students and highlight the need to include them in HE conversations about inclusive assessment.

2. Why did you develop or enhance your assessment and what was your rationale?

Research students are entitled to inclusive assessment as much as taught students but supervisors may not have the awareness or expertise to identify the need and solution, and organisations may not be well positioned to support. After I noticed that disabled research students did not have access to, or awareness of, alternative assessments or reasonable adjustments in our institution I changed the internal processes and offered alternatives to the thesis and reasonable adjustments for the viva for two students. We then carried out research to understand the policy and practice in place across Scotland.

3. What enhancements or changes did you implement in assessment in making this more innovative, diverse or inclusive of diverse learner cohorts?

MRes Thesis- hybrid thesis/structured presentation alternative assessment in place of longer written thesis.

Viva voce - agreed reasonable adjustments with examiners related to areas of questioning in advance, length and structure of questions, expectations for refocusing candidate, asking follow-up clarifying questions and breaks.

4. What informed your approach to the changes you made, e.g. student feedback, observations of student difficulty, insights from literature or research findings, assessment pass rates etc.?

Many years working successfully with undergraduates to accommodate their disabilities led me to proactively discuss reasonable adjustments and alternative assessments with research postgraduates I supervised.

5. What key changes have you seen as a result of this change to your assessment practice?

Improved systems and awareness at our own organisation as well as growing awareness and implementation in my subject after dissemination at a conference.

6. How are you evaluating the effectiveness of these enhancements or changes implemented?

Successful student outcomes!

7. Tips for practitioners:

Do you have any tips for practitioners wanting to make similar enhancements or changes in their assessments that you could add in?

Talk to your research students throughout their studies about their assessment and work together to identify appropriate reasonable adjustments and/or alternative assessment. Depending on the maturity of your organisation's approach, you may need to be creative and consult with colleagues to identify options and processes. It's important to consider environmental as well as assessment-focused adjustments for the viva and to agree with your student how you will communicate with your organisation and the external examiners so that the arrangements can be approved.

Unfortunately, there is no established literature base to provide guidance and our desk-based policy review of Scottish universities show that there is a lot further to go to implement the recommendation of the subsequent 'Improving the Experience of Disabled PhD Students in STEM' report (Disabled Students UK, 2023). Another tip would be to read the report and think about what further steps you and your organisation could take.