Being Inclusive in Supervising Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs)

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/system/files/downloads/ukpsf_dof_doctoral_supervisors_150416_final_0.pdf

1. Foster a culture of inclusivity (See also Being Inclusive in Creating Inclusive Learning and Teaching Environments)

Ask PGRs whether they anticipate any particular barriers or concerns with study from the outset, taking a holistic view of the PGR’s situation. Ensure relevant factors are passed on to others in the supervisory team. This approach demonstrates a willingness to appreciate difference and gives PGRs an opportunity to talk about disability or other constraints that may be relevant. This guidance on supporting disabled researchers may also help.

Encourage PGRs to contact their Faculty Disability Coordinator or attend a student mental health drop-in. PGRs may feel more comfortable talking their difficulties through and exploring the available support with someone outside of the supervisory team initially.

2. Reflect on your experience and practice (see also Being Inclusive in 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 PGRs, 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.

3. Be aware of cultural norms

Be aware that the cultural background of a PGR may affect the PGR-supervisor working relationship. PGRs 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\(^3\)

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4. 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 PGRs to concentrate on engaging in discussion and consider allowing audio recording of meetings, or provide a bullet pointed record. Difficulties with memory, concentration, dexterity and dyslexia 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.

Agree on any actions at the end of the meeting so that you both have a shared understanding. People on the autism spectrum can take a very literal interpretation of language. Where PGRs have adopted a different understanding of actions that need to be taken, this can lead to tensions in the PGR-supervisor relationship.

5. Support PGRs 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. This can be problematic for PGRs with mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression, and may exacerbate these. Difficulties with planning and time estimation are common to people with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia and dyspraxia.

6. Be aware of PGRs’ mental well-being

Undertaking a research degree can be an isolating experience. Encourage PGRs to attend the regular mental health drop-ins 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.

7. Recognise that reading is more effortful for some PGRs

If disabled PGRs use assistive software to access written text, ask them to demonstrate this or try it out yourself to fully understand the process. This can be useful in trying to

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6 Eley & Jennings
7 Farrar & Young
understand working methods and time constraints, especially when texts include diagrams, which can be tricky to navigate using screen reading software. The PGR may also have difficulty accessing journals in the right format. The RNIB/ UoL Transcription Centre can help with this.

8. 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. (NB it is permitted under University Policy for PGRs to use a 3rd party proof reader.) Non-native speakers and those with a disability affecting their written work many find it demoralising to have these weaknesses repeatedly highlighted, unless they have specifically requested this.

9. Facilitate engagement with peers
Consider whether there are social and environmental barriers to engagement opportunities, particularly if the PGR’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. These relationships may not form naturally if PGRs do not come into contact with each other.

10. Manage expectations around fieldwork (see also Being Inclusive in Fieldtrips)
Assist PGRs in thinking through the activities, logistics and timescales of any proposed fieldwork taking into account any constraints the PGR has. Supervisors will have more experience of such activities and be able to ensure the PGR has a realistic idea of what this will involve and whether it will be achievable for them.

11. Reasonable adjustments
If supervising a disabled PGR, familiarise yourself with guidance available from the PGR Office about reasonable adjustments for assessment. Talking through possible adjustments at an early stage will help alleviate some of the anxiety involved in preparing for a Viva.

Find the full set of Being Inclusive in... guides at http://www.sdduonline.leeds.ac.uk/inclusiveteaching/

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