

Guidance for Viva examination of Autistic/neurodivergent PhD Students



A note on language

The terms “Autistic students” and “students on the autism spectrum” have been identified as the preferred identifiers by the majority of Autistic persons (i.e. identity-first language; Farahar, 2019; Kenny et al., 2015).

This document is for:

- Autistic/neurodivergent students
- Supervisors of Autistic/neurodivergent students
- Examiners of Autistic/neurodivergent students
- Universities hosting Viva examinations for Autistic/neurodivergent PhD Students

Potential differences/adjustment needs/issues:

As an external examiner/supervisor/host university of an Autistic/neurodivergent student, you should be aware of some of the potential differences that might occur:

General Guidance:

Whilst the following suggestions are likely to be generally helpful, they will not necessarily apply equally to all individuals.

Autistic/neurodivergent students may have differences in how they interact in social and communication situations.

- They may find eye contact difficult/have a difference in eye contact
 - Consider setting the room up so that the student is not directly facing anyone
- They may take some comments literally
 - Avoid the use of metaphorical language, be prepared to re-phrase/ask questions in more explicit concrete terms if the candidate is having difficulty interpreting what is being asked or expressing their knowledge clearly
- They may require additional time for responding to questions due to differences in processing information in real time.
- They may become anxious if an agreed timetable is not followed:

It is suggested you state:

“The viva will start when I ask you the next question”

“This is the last question”

“The viva is now over and you can leave the room”

- The student may find it difficult to know how much information is required, particularly when discussing a topic of interest.
- They may struggle to present themselves to the best effect despite having the knowledge and skills.
- They may fail to vary their tone of voice or find an appropriate level of formality.

The prospect of a Viva exam can be particularly demanding, particularly for some Autistic persons who have to prepare cognitive scripts for the majority of interactions with others. It is reasonable to consider implementing some adjustments for these students.

Reasonable Adjustments (suggestions to be selected for each individual):

- Written Viva instructions should be provided to the student prior to the process (with clear explanations about the whole PhD process including thesis and viva).
- The Supervisor should endeavour to explain the process and structure in detail before the event and after. E.g. do you shake hands, say hello on entry, rough timings, what can be taken in, seating, numbers present, format and follow up etc.
 - For students who are particularly tactile averse, please agree with all involved, including the student, a non-tactile greeting and exit – it might help, for instance, to place a table between examiners and the student and greet orally verbally “Good afternoon [student name]”
- If possible, provide an opportunity to meet the examiners beforehand (possibly by Skype) if there are anxieties about meeting new people: it should be made clear this is not part of the examination and the conversation would not address academic matters but be limited to an introduction to personnel and the likely conduct of the viva
- Ensure that the student has prior knowledge of the location and can visit and become familiar with the environment and set up beforehand
 - Avoid timetable changes (including venue) as much as possible: if unavoidable, provide notice as far in advance as possible
- The student may need to check the sensory impact of the room prior to the Viva e.g. lighting, distractions etc. and request reasonable alterations.
- It may be appropriate for the student to bring a representative from the Student Disability Service or another acceptable individual for support.
- Explain the procedure and method of examination at the start of the Viva

- Allow the candidate to take in written notes and a copy of their thesis, and to jot down notes and refer back to these as necessary
- Provide flipcharts and other materials to enable a candidate to explain ideas in writing or diagrams where beneficial
- Present one question at a time (avoiding multi-faceted questions)
 - Write questions down if requested;
 - Allow the use of a digital recorder for the part of the viva where corrections are discussed
- Always use clear, plain English and unambiguous language
- Allow extra time for responses to questions, as processing information may take longer. It is not usually necessary to automatically repeat or rephrase a question if the student does not answer or ask for clarification, typically they are processing the question and any interruption to this may confuse them and make answering difficult.
- The Viva process should, where possible, not be protracted and breaks should be made, at, minimum every 2 hours.
- It may also be necessary to provide more regular breaks.
- The student may request a break if they become stressed or overwhelmed during the process
- Ensure examiners are aware of the potential for unusual behaviour/social communication and greater anxiety than might typically be expected.
- Examiners should watch for signs of stress/anxiety and should suggest short breaks – this may be difficult if the student is good at “masking” their difficulties and differences, assume competence, but be aware that they may not ask for a break/clarification/and so on. Anxiety might be very minimal “stim/fidget” behaviours, such as flicking their nails, fiddling with jewellery/objects and so on
- If the student becomes agitated, appears to be talking incessantly or begins to ramble, a break should be suggested.
- It may be necessary to re-word questions or introduce a degree of prompting. Again, do not do this automatically when a student does not respond in a typical amount of time, they should be made aware prior to the examination that unless they ask for clarification, they will be afforded time to process questions

- Signal when a response is sufficient or more details are required e.g. “I do not want you to focus on that particular detail of your methodology, I want you to consider the broad application of your findings ...”
- Signal Viva completion
- Provide clear feedback. Assistance may be required for follow up action, ideally clarified in writing as soon as possible.
- **Ideally, post-examination the student’s university (e.g. supervisor, disability advisor) should arrange a quiet space for the student to process the examination, and ask if they want someone to sit with them to either sit quietly, or help address any anxiety and/or overwhelm they might be feeling – please reassure them of how well they did, it is likely very difficult for them to ascertain this from non-orally verbalised indicators, e.g. examiners smiling may not be picked up on**

Further information:

Chown, N., Beardon, L., Martin, N., & Ellis, S. (2016). Examining intellectual prowess, not social difference: Removing barriers from the doctoral viva for Autistic candidates. *Journal of Inclusive Practice in Further and Higher Education*, 6(1), 22-38.

Farahar, C. T. (2019). *The importance of language – what’s in a name?* Retrieved from So, You're Autistic?: <https://soyoureAutistic.wordpress.com/the-importance-of-language-whats-in-a-name/>

Kenny, L., Hattersley, C., Molins, B., Buckley, C., Povey, C., & Pellicano, E. (2015). Which terms should be used to describe autism? Perspectives from the UK autism community. *Autism*, 20(4), 442–462. doi:10.1177/1362361315588200

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