Case study: making my viva accessible

Emma Rowlett, Disability Adviser for Postgraduate Students

Before I explain what was done to make my viva accessible it is perhaps necessary to briefly introduce myself. I studied for both my undergraduate and Master’s degrees at the University of Nottingham in the School of Sociology and Social Policy, before undertaking my PhD in the same department. During my thesis pending period I started work as the Disability Adviser for Postgraduate Students, based in the Graduate School. Although I had slight health problems when I began my studies in September 1999, I did not consider myself disabled at that time, but my health has slowly deteriorated and I now have multiple disabilities.

I realised fairly early on that I would need adjustments to my viva to ensure I could perform to my full potential, and my Disability Adviser and I began discussing these several months before I was due to submit my thesis. As my research looked at disability in Higher Education I was fairly confident that both my internal and external examiners would be responsive to any requests that were made, but I was a little apprehensive about the number of adjustments we were asking for. Once I submitted my thesis my Disability Adviser submitted the following information to my department to be passed on to my examiners:

Notes for examiners.

Emma has multiple disabilities and will require reasonable adjustments during her viva examination. The Vitae website includes useful information about creating "An Accessible Viva" and page 8 which provides specific advice to examiners:

http://vitae.ac.uk/CMS/files/upload/Premia-section-15-%28staff%29-an-accessible-viva-2010.pdf

If you have concerns about any of the reasonable adjustments suggested, please let Alison Haigh know. Emma is happy to discuss any of this further or answer any questions you may have, either at the start of her viva or in advance of it.
Issues Emma experiences as a result of her disabilities include the following:

- **Generalised fatigue**
- **Hearing impairment** - Emma may ask you to repeat questions she has not heard correctly, and is happy for you to tell her if you feel her answer suggests she has misheard you.
- **Chronic pain** in back, shoulders and neck plus intermittent and fluctuant inflammation in various parts of her body, particularly nerve tissue. Emma therefore requires her own ergonomic chair
- Pain, numbness and pins and needles in hands and arms, exacerbated by sitting for long periods, typing and mouse use. Regular breaks of about 5 minutes every 40-45 minutes will be required, in a way that is as non-disruptive to your questioning as possible.
- Emma may also need to take additional short breaks depending on her health on the day, and will notify you if one is required.
- Cognitive and information processing issues including short-term memory and word-recall difficulties, especially under stressful conditions
- Emma may inadvertently interchange words whilst speaking or writing. If this happens she is happy for you to correct her so as to avoid misunderstanding. It would also be helpful if questions are kept short and multiple part questions are avoided, as Emma will find it difficult to hold and process these.
- Reduced and deteriorating levels of concentration and functioning, therefore a morning viva is requested
- Mental health issues, including ongoing depression accompanied by anxiety and low self-esteem. Emma may experience a panic-attack and a short break may be requested in order to enable her to regain a more appropriate level of functioning.
- **Visual Impairment** - Whilst Emma can read small amounts of material in suitably prepared large print, (Verdana 20pt on canary yellow paper) and may bring some printed notes into the viva, a computer with screen-reading and screen-magnification software is required to enable her access an electronic copy of her thesis. As this is a tiring and time consuming process, rather than indicating references by page number or by describing the position on the page, please provide
Emma with the first few words of the section you are referring to so that she can type these in to search for them. Ideally, details of any corrections that she is required to make should be provided electronically as Emma cannot read standard sized print or handwritten comments.

- Emma will be unable to see any visual clues you may make (e.g. nodding, smiling and other body language) to provide encouragement or to indicate that you are happy with her answer and wish to move on to the next question. It would be helpful to verbalise these instead.

My examiners did not feel the need to contact me further in regards to this information, although my department did liaise with me to ensure that the location was suitable. In order to ensure access to a computer with screen-reading software and my own ergonomic chair, my viva took place in my office at work. This familiar environment also helped to reduce my anxiety levels. A colleague bought us water and cups of tea and put up signs asking people to be quiet as an examination was in progress. A larger room was arranged for the ‘summing up’ as my office was not large enough to accommodate my two supervisors as well. This room also had a comfortable chair for me to use, and efforts were made to ensure we would not be disturbed.

I was in reasonably good health on the day of my viva, but I was naturally very nervous. My examiners arrived and the first thing they told me was that they had no major concerns about my thesis but wanted to explore a few issues with me. In my nervous state I missed the significance of this, and was very surprised when I later found out that they only required minor corrections.

My viva was held in the morning as requested and was fairly short as my examiners were aware that maintaining my concentration for a long-time would be difficult and that my pain levels would increase as the day went on. They took care to speak very clearly and I did not have any real problems hearing or understanding their questions. I did not need to try and find the sections they were referring to in my thesis as they gave me enough detail to be sure I knew which part they were asking about, and this made things much easier for me.

I couldn’t answer every question they asked, and one in particular made me think about something I have never considered and would be interested in exploring further later. Several people had told me they had enjoyed their viva
as it gave them a chance to talk about their research, and although I had thought they were just trying to make me less nervous I did actually enjoy it myself. However, if my examiners had not been aware of my disabilities and made appropriate adjustments I doubt this would have been the case. They gave me the opportunity to talk about my research and explain my ideas without being hampered by my disabilities and they did so in such a way that I did not feel at all like I was getting ‘special treatment’.

I am really grateful to the following people for helping to make my viva accessible:

- Kathleen Fennemore, PA to Dean and Head of School, Graduate School
- Rachel Fyson, Lecturer at the Centre for Social Work within the School of Sociology and Social Policy (internal examiner)
- Alison Haigh, Postgraduate Administrator, School of Sociology and Social Policy
- Lesley Morrice, Disability Adviser, Disability Support
- Sheila Riddell, Professor of Inclusion and Diversity, University of Edinburgh (external examiner)