



UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

# **Policy framework Studying with a disability**

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## Background

The Executive Board of the University of Amsterdam strongly recognises the importance of inclusive education. In the 2023-2024 academic year, the Board identified an urgent need to make adjustments more accessible for disabled students in the long term. The University of Amsterdam (UvA) provides support for students with a disability that enables these students to fully participate in teaching and assessment and that is in line in with their degree programme's learning objectives and exit qualifications.

Although various support is already available in practice, there was no cohesive UvA-wide framework for granting basic adjustments. This framework provides direction, clarity and consistency in support for students with a disability, and enables employees who are responsible for student guidance and support to fulfil their role within a clear structure.

This policy framework is an update of the 2016 'Studying and working with a disability' policy. The review was prompted by an evaluation of previous policy in 2023. Both UvA employees responsible for student guidance and support and bodies that oversee these activities have expressed a need for greater cohesion and clarity in support for students with a disability. They have specifically raised:

- **The desire for a more uniform process for granting examination adjustments and teaching and learning adjustments to students with a disability.**
- **The need for clear, UvA-wide, basic policy principles on accessible and inclusive education**, on which faculties can build in terms of both policy and implementation.

Students have also explicitly raised the need for improvements. On the one hand, they point to a lack of clear and accessible information on support options (particularly regarding the adjustments that can be made, the conditions for requesting these adjustments and the circumstances in which they are granted). On the other hand, clarity is needed on where to submit support requests, particularly in complex situations.

The framework is in line with the legal obligation to ensure that all students in higher education have a right to equal opportunities, as stipulated in the Equal Treatment (Disabled and Chronically Ill People) Act (*Wet gelijke behandeling op grond van handicap of chronische ziekte*) and the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (*Wet op het hoger onderwijs en wetenschappelijk onderzoek*).

This central policy framework applies to:

- Prospective and current students with a permanent or temporary disability or chronic illness.
- Those who have a working relationship with students with disabilities, including study advisers, student counsellors, faculty policy officers, Graduate School directors, programme directors and Examinations Boards.

## Vision

The UvA is a public higher education institution with a clear ambition to offer an inclusive, safe and welcoming learning environment. This means that the UvA strives to offer an educational environment where every student feels recognised and supported. The UvA takes responsibility for the wellbeing and development of all its students.

Accessibility is essential to inclusive education. We want every student to be able to fully participate in our study programmes and develop at both academic and personal levels. To do this, we need to meet a wide range of requirements and remove barriers wherever possible. The UvA is a campus organisation striving to offer a learning environment where all students can fully and independently participate in education, assessment and broader academic life. This means addressing accessibility in all its forms, including physical, digital, communication and organisational accessibility, as well as the accessibility and usability of lecture rooms, buildings, examination locations and facilities.

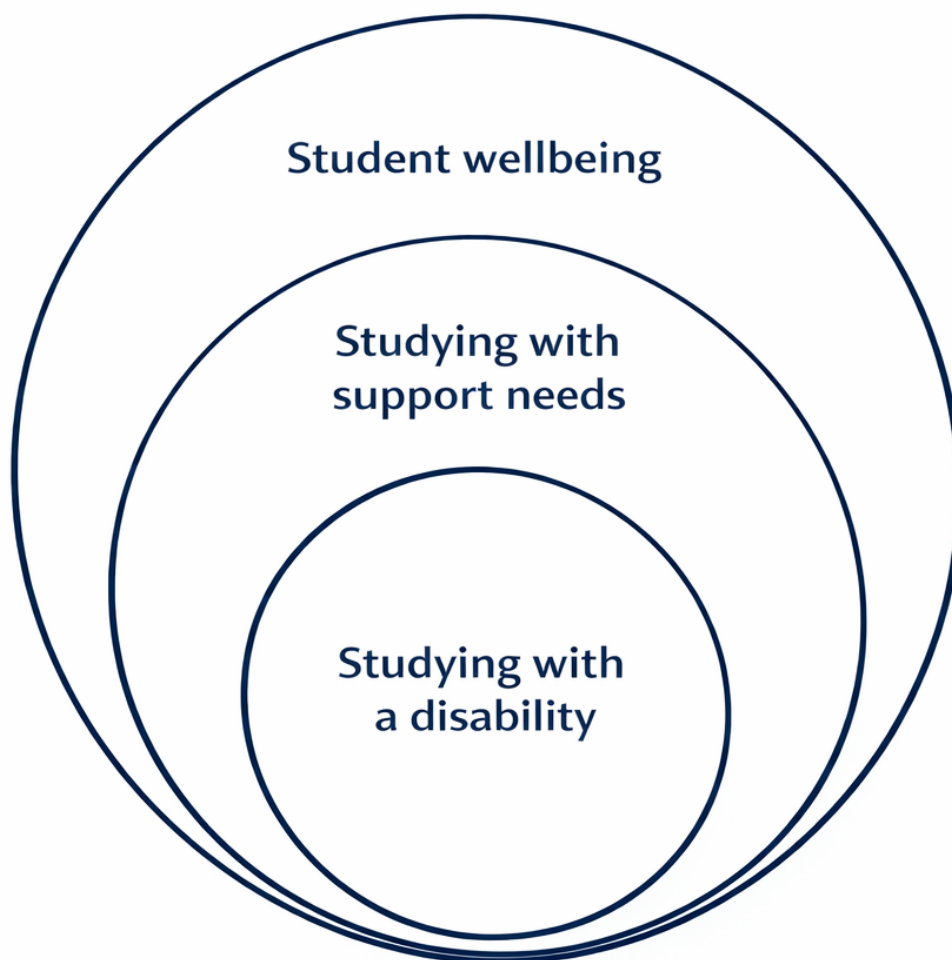
The UvA's digital landscape, which includes websites, apps, digital learning materials and the learning environment (such as Canvas and linked applications) must be accessible for all users. This means that the minimum requirement for all digital applications is compliance with the international Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1, level AA. Accessibility is therefore included as a criterion in the schedule of requirements for tendering procedures and in the assessment of new digital tools.

The UvA is dedicated to removing barriers to participation in education wherever possible and offering students equal opportunities. To ensure that all students have the same learning outcomes, unequal investment may be necessary. For example, by making effective and appropriate arrangements in the form of support or adjustments. In accordance with the applicable laws and regulations, situations can occur in which the investment needed to eliminate a barrier places a disproportionate burden on the institution. In such cases, decisions are reached based on reasonableness, feasibility and proportionality. Physical and digital infrastructure, information management and support comply with the legal requirements and are tailored to reasonable individual needs, whilst maintaining the study programme's exit qualifications and quality requirements.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In this policy framework, 'reasonable' is understood to mean that the adjustment effectively removes a specific barrier, is proportional in relation to the disability, and is feasible without placing a disproportionate burden on the institution, as referred to in Article 2 of the Equal Treatment (Disabled and Chronically Ill People) Act. *'The prohibition of discrimination also imposes a duty on those who are subject to it to make effective needs-based adaptations, unless this would place a disproportionate burden on them'* and Article 7.13(2)(m) of the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act *'the manner in which students with a disability or chronic illness are reasonably given the opportunity to take the examinations'*

## Terms and definitions



*Figure 1: Care circles for students. Included based on [ECIO](#) research and focus groups*

Studying with a disability falls under ‘Studying with support needs’, which is part of the broader theme of ‘Student wellbeing’. Studying with a disability focuses on promoting accessible education for students with a temporary or permanent disability.

The broader overlying category of ‘support needs’ also relates to other groups such as informal carers, young parents or students running a business. Although the nature of the support needs can vary, the adjustments – such as additional examination time or financial support – can be the same. Student wellbeing transcends these categories.

Despite developments in inclusive language at the UvA, such as the use of the term ‘support needs’, we continue to use the phrase ‘**studying with a disability**’. The UvA is thereby adhering to the existing national frameworks and terminology. By using this terminology, we ensure that it is clear to everyone which group of students we are talking about and how they can be granted adjustments to enable them to follow a study programme at the UvA.

A **disability** is any physical, sensory or other disorder that may prevent a student from participating in education, assessment and study-related activities, as described by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW).

This includes:

- Visual, auditory and motor/physiological disabilities.
- Psychological disabilities such as phobias and anxiety disorders.
- Mental disabilities (neurodivergence), including but not limited to conditions such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, ADHD and autism.
- Disabilities due to a chronic illness, problems with speech, stamina, memory, concentration and so on.

A physical, sensory or other disorder above will be relevant for **UvA students** if:

- it delays their study progress;
- they have problems with the physical and/or digital accessibility of education and assessment.

Finally, it is important to note that a disability can be both temporary and permanent.

## Adjustments

The UvA offers students with a disability support in the form of examination adjustments and teaching and learning adjustments. Although this support is already available in practice, to date there have been no UvA-wide frameworks for the granting and implementation of these adjustments. This policy framework provides these frameworks, in which a distinction is made between basic adjustments and individual adjustments. It also provides further information on what the adjustments entail, how and from whom to request them and who decides on requests.<sup>2</sup>

### Basic adjustments

Basic examination adjustments and basic teaching and learning adjustments are adjustments that can be granted in connection with a disability and/or chronic illness to students with a disability for the duration of the study programme or for a specified period. The parties responsible for granting adjustments are:

- *Basic and other teaching and learning adjustments*  
The **dean** has the authority to grant basic and other teaching and learning adjustments and can give **study advisers** a mandate to grant basic teaching and learning adjustments on behalf (and under the final responsibility) of the dean.
- *Basic and other examination adjustments*  
The degree programme **examinations board** has the authority to grant basic and other

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<sup>2</sup> For all current information on how to request the adjustments mentioned in this framework, students can visit: <https://student.uva.nl/en/information/request-a-special-facility-e-g-for-examinations>.

examination adjustments in accordance with Article 7.13(2)(m) of the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act. An examinations board can give a mandate to **student counsellors** to grant basic examination adjustments on behalf (and under the final responsibility of) the examinations board.

Further information on the relevant basic adjustments can be found in appendix 2 to this document. For all faculties, students with a disability are in principle entitled to the basic adjustments. Both teaching and learning adjustments and examination adjustments apply when taking modules or minors at one or more UvA faculties.

## Individual adjustments

Individual adjustments are adjustments that can be granted in connection with a disability and/or chronic illness to students with a disability for the duration of the study programme OR for a specified period, which do not feature in the list of basic adjustments (appendix 2). The parties responsible for granting adjustments are:

- *Individual teaching and learning adjustments*  
The **dean** has authority to grant individual teaching and learning adjustments. The dean can give a mandate to the College or **Graduate School director** or **programme director**.
- *Individual examination adjustments*  
The **examinations board** has the authority to grant individual examination adjustments.

As individual situations can vary widely, it is not possible to establish a single uniform framework for individual adjustments. However, it is important to us that the process for determining individual adjustments is equal, transparent and fair for each student, and that the outcome is always reasonable, well-substantiated and justifiable.

We use the assessment framework below to determine what is reasonable in a given situation. The specified elements and questions serve as a guide for careful decision-making.

- Purpose: does it help to remove a specific barrier?
- Effectiveness: is offering the adjustment effective in practice?
- Proportionality: is the adjustment proportionate to the nature and severity of the student's disability?
- Disproportionate burden: can the educational institution make the adjustment without facing a disproportionate burden?
- Alternatives: are there less drastic measures that achieve the same effect?

	Teaching and learning	Examinations
	<i>Basic adjustment</i>	
<b>Authority to take decisions</b>	Dean	Examinations Board
<i>Mandate</i>	Study adviser	Student counsellor
	<i>Individual adjustment</i>	
<b>Authority to take decisions</b>	Dean	Examinations Board
<i>Mandate</i>	College/Graduate School director Programme director	-

*Authority to grant adjustments for studying with a disability*

## Supporting documentation and accountability

Students must be able to present evidence in support of their request for adjustments, so that the request can be assessed and a decision reached as to whether or not examination adjustments or teaching and learning adjustments will be granted. This means that students with a disability and/or chronic illness must be able to produce written evidence of their disability and/or chronic illness. Examples include a certificate issued by a doctor, general practitioner or specialist, a treating therapist, psychologist or psychiatrist, social worker or other authority. This certificate can be used to determine the support or adjustments to which a student is entitled. A table showing the frameworks for the medical certificate can be found in appendix 3. A clear diagram showing who students can contact if they have an objection to, or complaint about, a decision on the granting of adjustments can also be found in appendix 2.

## Closing words

With this policy framework, the University of Amsterdam is taking an important step towards making inclusive and accessible education for students with a disability a permanent part of its culture. Offering clear frameworks for basic adjustments, a proper procedure for individual adjustments and a clear allocation and accountability process is in keeping with the principle of equal opportunities for every student.

At the same time, the UvA acknowledges that inclusive education is an ongoing development process that requires continuous reflection, adaptation and collaboration. We have therefore adopted a cyclical Plan-Do-Check-Act approach, in which the policy is reviewed and improved every year based on practical experience and feedback from students and staff.

## Appendix 1 – Legal Framework

Educational institutions are legally obliged to offer accessible education to students with a disability or chronic illness. This obligation is based on the **Equal Treatment (Disability and Chronic Illness) Act (WGBh/cz, 2020)**. Under the Act, institutions are obliged to make reasonable, effective adjustments to enable students to fully participate in education. The institution is obliged to properly investigate any request for adjustments, for which the student is accountable. A medical certificate issued by a party such as a doctor, practitioner or approved body is still required.

The **Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (WHW, 2023)** also elaborates further on this obligation. For example, Articles 5.7, 5.12, 5.23 and 7.13 of the WHW stipulate that the Teaching and Examination Regulations (OER) must specify how students with a disability are enabled to sit examinations. The **Assessment Framework of the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (2018)** also explicitly identifies study programme feasibility for students with a disability as a point to consider when assessing new and existing degree programmes.<sup>3</sup> **Article 24** of the **UN Convention** on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified by the Netherlands in 2016, provides the overarching framework and obliges institutions to promote inclusive education and to ensure reasonable adjustments. The UvA has actively subscribed to this principle since the Netherlands signed the *UN Convention Declaration of Intent* in 2018.

The obligation to ensure physical accessibility stems from the **UN Convention** on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, specifically **Article 9** (Accessibility) and **Article 24** (Education). Finally, another essential component of inclusive education is digital accessibility. Educational institutions must comply with the **European Accessibility Act, EN 301 549**, which stipulates that digital information (such as study materials, web environments and communications) must be accessible for people with visual, hearing or cognitive disabilities.<sup>4</sup> Last of all, the [Digital Accessibility Decree](#) was incorporated into the Digital Government Act in June 2023. This Act will also apply to all higher education institutions.

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[https://www.nvaio.net/files/attachments/.11273/Beoordelingskader\\_accreditatiestelsel\\_hoger\\_onderwijs\\_Nederland.pdf](https://www.nvaio.net/files/attachments/.11273/Beoordelingskader_accreditatiestelsel_hoger_onderwijs_Nederland.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Article 3(1): Government authorities make their websites and mobile applications accessible by applying standard EN 301 549 (this standard includes the requirements of WCAG 2.1, levels A and AA), <https://www.digitoegankelijk.nl/wetgeving/wat-is-verplicht>

## Appendix 2 – Basic adjustments

### Examinations

<b>Adjustment</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Formal authority to take decisions</b>	<b>Mandate</b>
Eating and/or drinking during examinations	The student is permitted to eat and/or drink during examinations.	Examinations Board	Student counsellor
Medication use	The student is permitted to take medication during examinations.	Examinations Board	Student counsellor
Toilet breaks	The student is permitted to take one or more toilet breaks when needed, exclusively under the supervision of an invigilator.	Examinations Board	Student counsellor
Leaving the room	During the examination, the student is permitted to stretch their legs or take a break outside the examination room, exclusively under the supervision of an invigilator. The end time of the examination remains the same.	Examinations Board	Student counsellor
Own keyboard/mouse	The student is permitted to use their own keyboard/mouse for digital examinations, provided the device is compatible with the other hardware and software the UvA uses for digital assessments.	Examinations Board	Student counsellor
Magnifying glass	The student is permitted to use a magnifying glass, to be supplied by the student.	Examinations Board	Student counsellor

Non-electronic ear defenders (as sold in DIY stores)	The student is permitted to use non-electronic ear defenders, as sold in DIY stores. To be supplied by the student.	Examinations Board	Student counsellor
Paper examination	Where feasible, the student is entitled to a paper version of a digital examination.	Examinations Board	Student counsellor
Foam earplugs	These are foam earplugs without options for digital use. To be supplied by the student. Students do <i>not</i> need to request permission to use this adjustment.	Examinations Board	Student counsellor
Adapted furniture	The student is entitled to adapted furniture in accordance with the description in SIS. Possibilities vary per examination room, assessment of allocation by examinations office. <sup>5</sup>	Examinations Board	Student counsellor
Examination laptop	The student takes the examination on a laptop provided by the faculty/degree programme. Depending on the module, this adjustment cannot be granted in a separate room if specific software is required. This is at the discretion of the examinations office.	Examinations Board	Student counsellor
Larger font	For paper examinations, the student is entitled to exam papers printed in Arial font in size 12, or if not possible, to an examination printed in A3 size. For digital examinations, all students can zoom in to enlarge the font.	Examinations Board	Student counsellor

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<sup>5</sup> If a degree programme, programme cluster or faculty does not have an examinations office, the employee or employees responsible for organising and/or coordinating examinations carry out this assessment.

Text-to-speech software	The student uses text-to-speech software. In the case of paper examinations, this adjustment is granted in addition to an examination laptop.	Examinations Board	Student counsellor
Examination in an individual room	The student takes the examination in a separate room	Examinations Board	Student counsellor
Examination in a small group	Small-group examination setting. If this is not feasible for the examinations office, an examination in an individual room is also an option	Examinations Board	Student counsellor
Choice of seat	The student is entitled to a preferred seat in the examination room in accordance with the description in SIS	Examinations Board	Student counsellor
15 or 30 minutes of additional examination time	The examination time is extended by 15 or 30 minutes depending on the duration: - For examinations lasting up to two hours (<2 hours): 15 minutes of additional time - For examinations lasting two hours or more ( $\geq 2$ hours): 30 minutes of additional time	Examinations Board	Student counsellor

Exceptions to these basic examination adjustments are:

- Courses without examinations for the BSc in Computational Social Science.
- Examinations within joint degrees for which Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam is the coordinating institution, namely the MSc in Entrepreneurship, MSc in Bioinformatics and Systems Biology and MSc in Computer Science.
- Practical examinations for the degree programmes in the Faculty of Dentistry (ACTA) and the Faculty of Medicine (FdG).

Students can submit a notice of appeal against examinations board decisions to the [Examination Appeals Board](#).

## Teaching and learning

Adjustment**	Formal authority to take decisions	Mandate	Complaints procedure
Formal decision required			
Use of assistive listening system by lecturer/audio induction loop system – equipment to be supplied by the student	Dean	Study adviser	Arbitration Committee for Student Objections
Use of a sign language interpreter if necessary (including Canvas guest account) – the student is responsible for covering the costs of the sign language interpreter from their personal budget/UWV benefit	Dean	Study adviser	Arbitration Committee for Student Objections
Ava application licence (use of live subtitles during lectures)	Dean	Study adviser	Arbitration Committee for Student Objections
Online access to speech-to-text interpreter during lectures	Dean	Study adviser	Arbitration Committee for Student Objections
Field trip: buddy companion - the student is responsible for covering the costs from their personal budget/UWV benefit	Dean	Study adviser	Arbitration Committee for Student Objections
Field trip: own room - the student is responsible for covering the costs from their personal budget/UWV benefit	Dean	Study adviser	Arbitration Committee for Student Objections

Teaching Logistics - Building accessibility - Office chair - Support services	Dean	Study adviser	Arbitration Committee for Student Objections
In consultation, no formal decision required			
Sunglasses – to be supplied by the student *	Dean	Study adviser	Faculty complaints coordinator
Medication on table and medication use – medication to be supplied by the student*	Dean	Study adviser	Faculty complaints coordinator
Phone on table for medical reasons*	Dean	Study adviser	Faculty complaints coordinator
The option to occasionally walk around during lectures*	Dean	Study adviser	Faculty complaints coordinator
Assistance dog*	Dean	Study adviser	Faculty complaints coordinator
Non-electronic ear defenders (as sold in DIY stores) – to be supplied by the student*	Dean	Study adviser	Faculty complaints coordinator

\*These adjustments do not contravene existing rules and/or stem from legislation. No formal decision is therefore required. Students can make use of these adjustments in consultation with their study adviser and/or lecturer.

\*\* Students can submit objections to the [Arbitration Committee for Student Objections](#), except for the adjustments marked with an asterisk. For situations involving adjustments marked with an asterisk, students can submit a complaint to the [faculty complaints coordinator](#).

## Appendix 3 – Medical certificate frameworks

### Medical certificate frameworks

**Definition of certificate** A *certificate* is a medical or paramedical certificate or medical diagnosis issued by a BIG or other registered professional or an internationally recognised equivalent. See the student website for a detailed explanation<sup>6</sup>

**Who can request a certificate?** Based on the key principles in the GDPR, the person authorised to request the medical certificate is the person who must decide whether the student is entitled to the basic adjustment.

- For examination adjustments: student counsellor, or the Examinations Board.
- For teaching and learning adjustments: study adviser, the authorised Graduate School director/programme director (for individual adjustments) or the dean.

**Who can inspect the certificate?** Only the person or persons who need the certificate to perform their duties, namely deciding whether or not to grant the adjustments, can inspect the certificate. In practice, depending on the type of adjustment, this therefore means the student counsellor, study adviser, examinations board or authorised Graduate School director/programme director.

**What information can be requested/used?** When requesting and processing medical and other certificates, the UvA must not process any more data than strictly necessary. The processing must comply with the basic GDPR principles, including proportionality and subsidiarity. The minimum information required to take a decision is therefore established in advance. It must be clear what the purpose is and why the requested data is necessary for this purpose. As processing special personal data such as health data is essentially prohibited, the UvA relies on the ground for exception under Article 9(2)(b) of the GDPR when implementing this policy. This basis allows processing in the context of legal obligations and specific labour law and social protection rights.

**Where is information stored?** The certificate is stored at a central location where only the person who needs the certificate for the performance of their duties (deciding whether or not to grant an adjustment) has access to the information.

<sup>6</sup> <https://student.uva.nl/en/information/request-a-special-facility-e-g-for-examinations>

**How** is this data destroyed?

The specified retention period is currently up to one year after termination or expiry of the adjustment. If necessary, this may be amended to up to one year after a student is no longer enrolled at the UvA.

## Appendix 4 – Studying with a disability Expertise Team

### **Purpose**

The purpose of the Expertise Team is to increase expertise on Studying with a disability within the UvA and facilitate knowledge exchange in order to jointly improve processes. The Expertise Team plays a monitoring role in policy development and is also a key partner in the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle.

The Expertise Team also helps set the agenda in terms of updates and improvements within the educational logistics process surrounding Studying with a disability, as well as discussing cases that may require input at a different and/or higher level than that of the degree programme or faculty, or that have consequences for UvA-wide agreements.

### **Composition**

- Faculty coordinators academic adjustments (representatives, 3)
- Student counsellors (2)
- Academic Affairs employee
- ICTS employee
- Facility Services employee
- Examination organisation employee
- Legal Affairs employee
- University Library employee
- Head Education Service Centre
- Studying with a disability project leader/Cluster lead Study advice and student guidance
- UvA IDEAs student
- Central Student Council member
- The team liaises with the Studying with a disability portfolio holder from the Operational Managers' Meeting (BVO) if necessary