

# Guidelines for Supporting Students with Asperger Syndrome

## Background

Asperger syndrome (AS) is an autistic spectrum disorder caused by a biological brain dysfunction and is different from autism in two main ways; the absence of significant language delay, and the general intellectual skills are within the normal range (hence there will be more people with AS at University than people with autism). They experience a 'triad of impairment', comprising difficulties with:

1. social interaction
2. communication
3. flexibility of thought

Students with AS often have heightened senses, whereby there are particularly sensitive to noise, heat, smell, taste and hustle and bustle. They are often visual learners and often do not ask for help and support for themselves. They are sometimes vulnerable to teasing and bullying and they are often aware of their difficulties and frustrated that they cannot 'be like others'.

## Funding and Support

Many students with AS who are UK residents have extra disability funding from their LEA via the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA). This can fund a Student Helper employed through the Educational Support Office (ESO) for note taking and mentoring sessions. The DSA can also fund a specialist to help with the study-based difficulties they may experience via one-to-one sessions with our Specific Learning Difficulties tutor and living skills, personal and psychological support through an AS specialist via National Autistic Society.

The DSA can also fund specialist equipment such as:

- a computer and specialist software
- mini-disc recorder

Non-UK residents are eligible to apply for Student Helper support via the College-based fund; the International Students' Disability Support Grant.

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## Common Difficulties

### Social Interaction

- Displaying naïve and odd behaviour
- Problems with social relationships; difficulty making and keeping friends and may come across as arrogant, bossy or rude
- May be unable to predict or understand behaviour of others, so may ask lots of questions that seem obvious or unnecessary
- Problems empathising with others; may be tactless and say things that distress others without seeing themselves as responsible
- Clumsiness; poor gross motor skills and co-ordination, ungainly movement

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### **Communication**

- Difficulty in interpreting non-verbal communication (body language)
- Difficulty understanding or communicating feelings
- Poor non-verbal communication themselves (e.g. blank facial expressions, limited eye contact)
- Lack of intuition as to how to behave socially
- Difficulty understanding communication rules (e.g. turn taking in conversations)
- Language peculiarities (e.g. overly dull speech, speaking in a monotone, hyper-correct use of grammar and vocabulary but perhaps used in inappropriate situations and without real comprehension)
- Taking language literally therefore getting confused (e.g. get off my back, pull your weight) and responding in a way that may be perceived as cheeky or rude
- Inability to pick up on non verbal cues - lack of understanding of sarcasm or irony, people's moods and feelings

### **Flexibility**

- Rigid, inflexible thinking; needing routine and structure
- Difficulty in understanding the significance of events in a wider context
- Understands and thinks in a more logical way – tends to like maths and computing, where there are clear-cut right or wrong answers and effects are more predictable. May remember facts but not remember doing something
- May have obsessions that interfere with learning (e.g. rigid rules and routines)
- Difficulty coping with change; new projects or exam times can be especially difficult
- Distress of not understanding information may cause increase in coping mechanisms such as repetitive behaviours (muttering, other verbal habits), panic and incessant questioning
- Possible misunderstandings because may not realise other people do not know what they know (e.g. may not ask for an extension because they automatically assume their tutor knows their grandmother fell ill over the weekend)
- If they are not interested in some aspects of the course, they may not apply themselves to those aspects
- May be focused on the present and find it hard to be motivated by the future
- Lack of comprehension

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### **Suggested Strategies – General**

- All the reading, joining in teaching sessions and completing of work required may take longer for a student with AS so allow extra time
- Careful timetabling; regular lectures in the same rooms, informing the student in good time of any changes

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- If a change (e.g. in timetable, room, lecturer) is inevitable give clear, specific information as far ahead as possible
  - Considered planning and support for year abroad, field trips or work placement, arranged in consultation with the student and ESO well in advance
  - Try to role play new social situations before they occur in reality
  - Be honest
  - Awareness of heat, light, noise and smell
  - Understand the frustration of being unable to express feelings and needs
  - Avoid metaphors or colloquial speech, sarcasm or irony
  - Awareness that eye contact can break concentration for them
  - Gain attention before communicating
  - Respond immediately to bullying or harassment by others
  - Use photos, diaries, charts, lists, timetables
  - Discuss with the student whether she or he wants other students to be made aware of their condition
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### **Suggested Strategies – Teaching**

- A multi-sensory approach to teaching, particularly visual input
- Keep background noise to a minimum (e.g. buzz from the OHP, clicking of pens)
- Explain at beginning of lecture what the structure and main points will be; providing a written summary in advance if possible
- Present material in a structured way; if broken into small steps, show how these come together as a whole
- Summarise regularly and build in regular stopping points to check understanding
- Say if something specific should be noted
- Be aware of over-use of gestures and other non-verbal communication as they will not be understood
- During group discussions have a strict 'one at a time' rule and use names – not being able to pick-up on non-verbal communication makes knowing when it is your turn or when to jump in with a point very difficult
- Awareness if student is expected to give presentations
- Use the student's interests to focus and extend your intervention

## **Guidelines for Supporting Students with Asperger Syndrome**

- Work on one area at a time
  - Never take for granted that the student knows the next step in a sequence of events or what you intend to do next
  - Be consistent in your approach and keep variations to a minimum
  - Guide gently back to the task in hand if necessary
  - If praising, say exactly what is right or appreciated and why
  - Help them to understand the needs of others - tell them confidentially in clear, simple terms if what they say upsets someone; in group work make clear exactly what is required of them; mediate to resolve disputes in calm, logical way
  - Set concrete, realistic goals to assist motivation (e.g. "If you want to become an engineer you must complete all parts of the course, even the essays.")
  - Use clear, unambiguous, succinct language (spoken and written)
  - Avoid or explain metaphors, irony etc and interpret what others say
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### **Suggested Strategies – Course Materials**

- Provide subject word lists, glossaries of terms and acronyms
  - Tell the student which of the recommended reading is 'essential' as early as possible to allow for pre-reading taking longer
  - Written material should be clear and simple
  - Left-justify typed material and use 1.5 spacing where possible
  - Use clear headings and bullet points
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### **Suggested Strategies - Assessments**

- Extra time in exams
- Cool, quiet, clean exam venue
- Allow leniency with assignment deadlines
- Allow submission of assignments by email