

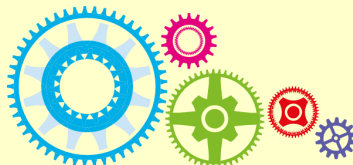


Living and Studying with Autism

Guidelines for Staff Working
with Students with
Autistic Spectrum
Conditions

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Introduction

This guide is intended to assist those working with students with Autistic Spectrum Condition and deals with some situations that may arise during the student's studies in higher education. It offers suggestions and recommendations, which can be supportive of both staff and students.

As University staff we have a responsibility to deliver an appropriate, accessible and inclusive curriculum to all students. We have a duty under law to make reasonable adjustments and proactively anticipate the support needs of students with Autistic Spectrum Condition.

The students have a responsibility to enter into discussions and negotiations, to share information and to participate in procedures to ensure that teaching is delivered to them appropriately. However, some students with Autistic Spectrum Condition may find it difficult to express or explain their requirements or may find it difficult to interact with staff and an amount of empathy is required from staff in these situations.

It is important to remember that many students may be apprehensive about disclosing a disability of any kind, possibly because of their concerns about staff reaction.

If you know of a student who has or may have Autistic Spectrum Condition and their support needs have not been formally addressed or if you require further information, advice or guidance please contact Disability Services:

Tel.: 01474 471001

Email: disability@hud.ac.uk

About Autistic Spectrum Condition

Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC) is a lifelong developmental condition that affects how a person communicates with and relates to other people, and to the world around them. It can lead to rigid and repetitive ways of thinking and behaving, difficulties in understanding social interactions and it can affect the ability to concentrate and process information.

The term Autistic Spectrum Condition is commonly used to cover a whole range of conditions, such as autism and Asperger syndrome, which have the following key difficulties in common:

- Social interaction and inter-personal relationships
- Verbal and non-verbal communication
- Imagination, behaviour and flexibility of thought

As Autism is a spectrum condition, it means that it affects different people in different ways and the support required by each person will be individual to them. It is estimated that that around 1 in every 100 people are affected by autism. Many have an additional learning disability such as dyslexia or ADHD. While some require specialist care and support, many live independently.

**"Autism isn't a disease.
Ignorance is and it's spreading."**

Student - University of Huddersfield

Living and Studying with Autism

How can Autistic Spectrum Condition Affect a Student?

Social interaction and inter-personal relationships

Difficulties in understanding social conventions, norms and behaviour can be a factor for some individuals. This can mean that students with Autistic Spectrum Condition may not realise they have said something which may upset another person or are dominating a conversation. There may also be a lack of awareness about personal space. A factor for a lot of people is the inability to empathise or imagine how another person thinks or feels – including the realisation that other people hold different beliefs to your own. This can have implications for students in a variety of situations including classroom and social settings.

Although some students with Autistic Spectrum Condition may have an ability to speak articulately about something they are interested in, they may find it difficult to talk about emotions in the same way, to make 'small talk' or to start and end conversations. Small numbers of students find interaction and communication extremely difficult in any circumstance, especially with someone unfamiliar.

Group work or any kind of collaborative project can be daunting for Autistic Spectrum Condition students. There is a requirement to interact socially with others, achieve a balance between listening and speaking and not to dominate or withdraw from the situation. This may also be accompanied by a worry that the student does not have total control over the entire process and is reliant on the knowledge and dedication of others.

“Having autism makes it hard for me to work with people who I do not know.”

Natalie Toft - Law

Living and Studying with Autism

How can Autistic Spectrum Condition Affect a Student?

Social interaction and inter-personal relationships

Students with Autistic Spectrum Condition can experience difficulties in making friends. They may believe a casual acquaintance to be a good friend – which can lead to disappointment when the friendship does not live up to their expectations. Sometimes Autistic Spectrum Condition students do not share interests in current trends, fashions or hobbies which may leave a student feeling isolated or 'separate'. Others may have their own absorbing interests and are not concerned with peer pressure.

Loneliness, isolation and low self-esteem can be a factor and lead on to more serious mental health difficulties. In some cases, students with Autistic Spectrum Condition can experience intolerance, bullying and manipulation from others.

"It bothers me that, in order to be accepted by society I have to leave my comfort zone just so everyone else can be in theirs. "

Student - University of Huddersfield

Living and Studying with Autism

How can Autistic Spectrum Condition Affect a Student?

Verbal and non-verbal communication

There can be a tendency to interpret language literally. In response to the question “Can you provide a summary of the chapter?”, an Autistic Spectrum Condition student may answer “yes” without realising the inference was for them to explain the content. Phrases such as “pull your socks up” or “I’m under the weather” would potentially be difficult to understand or misleading, as would sarcasm or puns such as, “oh great, I’m late for my lecture”.

A number of Autistic Spectrum Condition students have a pedantic speaking style, using precise language and no abbreviations. Some may have monotonous speech which does not vary in tone or rhythm whilst others may have a speech pattern where the intonation is exaggerated.

Many students with Autistic Spectrum Condition will not pick-up on the non-verbal aspects of communication such as appropriate eye-contact, facial expression, tone of voice, posture or gesture. They may appear insensitive or even rude as a result. They may stare intensely, show no expression on their face at all, laugh or frown at inappropriate intervals, avoid eye contact altogether or not realise when someone is bored by their conversation.

"I liken autism to having just one eye. One half of the world is blank whilst the other is in perfect clarity."

Student - University of Huddersfield

Living and Studying with Autism

How can Autistic Spectrum Condition Affect a Student?

Imagination, behaviour and flexibility of thought

Some students with Autistic Spectrum Condition have intensive interests, sometimes in ordinary things like computers and sometimes in more obscure things like extractor fans. They can be inclined to dominate conversations or talk about this interest to the exclusion of all else. However, this can lead to extensive knowledge of a particular subject, a great ability to assimilate a vast amount of information and an expansive vocabulary. The student may be a very high achiever as a result. It can also lead to a lack of motivation to focus on other topics outside the area of interest or poor attention levels if they are bored by other topics.

Some students with Autistic Spectrum Condition develop an absorbing interest with collecting and categorising objects such as stones, leaflets etc. or mentally doing the same with dates, public transport timetables etc. Many people with Autistic Spectrum Condition have a good memory and ability to learn by rote. Again there are positive and negative impacts in terms of the student's studies. A student may be able to memorise and reproduce facts, but they may have difficulty understanding the implication of these or applying the knowledge to an assignment.

Many students with Autistic Spectrum Condition strive for perfection in the standard of their work. This can make production of a piece of work a time-consuming, difficult and sometimes distressing task. In some cases, students can surpass their brief in their quest to produce a high quality product or exceed the word limit.

Living and Studying with Autism

How can Autistic Spectrum Condition Affect a Student?

Imagination, behaviour and flexibility of thought

Resistance to change is often a feature of Autistic Spectrum Condition. If there is a change to the daily routine or environment, students can become anxious and find it difficult to deal with the adjustments. Often a desire for order and predictability is present, which can lead to rituals such as the need to do activities in a particular sequence or lining up objects in a specific way, such as positioning pens prior to the start of an exam.

Some students with Autistic Spectrum Condition are inclined to be truthful to the point where this may cause hurt or offence or they may share sensitive information about others without realising that this could have consequences. Sometimes individuals are inclined to pass on too much information about themselves or assume that all people are honest, leaving themselves vulnerable.

Just under half the individuals with Autistic Spectrum Condition are very susceptible to sensory stimuli, particularly sounds, smell, tastes, movement, pain and temperature. The stimuli can cause distress to students in some situations, but are unlikely to appear out of the ordinary to an individual who does not have Autistic Spectrum Condition. This can include things like smells coming from cafes, PowerPoint presentations containing moving images, the distraction of a bird on a window sill outside the classroom, a hot lecture theatre etc.

Some students with Autistic Spectrum Condition can exhibit clumsiness or poor motor skills. Mannerisms such as tapping their fingers or 'ticks' may also be present, particularly at times of stress such as coursework deadlines, presentations or exams.

Overcoming Stereotypes

It is important to remember that a student with Autistic Spectrum Condition may not fit the 'typical profile' of what people expect from someone with Autism – for example, if they are female, if they are articulate, if they are very sociable, if they don't always seem to be struggling or if they identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT).

Many Autistic Spectrum Condition students are high achievers if the right support is in place and not all are friendless loners – students may find it patronising to be praised just for getting good marks or for having some friends. They may not want to be compared with other autistic students either positively or negatively as they are individuals in their own right.

If you have met one person with Autistic Spectrum Condition, you have met one person with Autistic Spectrum Condition!

“I am an autistic, one who is blessed and cursed. I carry many burdens both social and academic but have gained unique gifts in return. Though many battles still lie ahead, I know without question that I will not face them alone.”

Thomas Parker - Games Design

Challenges for Students with Autistic Spectrum Condition and University

Research has shown that there are many challenges for students with Autistic Spectrum Condition who want to enter and succeed in HE:

Unrealistic expectations

- what university study is really like
- content of study subject or course
- performing at the same high standard as in secondary education
- fellow students' interests and dedication

The social and physical environment

- difficulty picking up unwritten social rules when interacting with tutors and fellow students
- difficulty tolerating background noise, lighting, crowding or other sensory aspects of the university environment
- handling the social isolation that often comes with living in a new environment

Problems concerning assessment (even when mastering the subject matter)

- difficulty interpreting ambiguous and open assignment briefs correctly
- lack of understanding why something needs to be done
- difficulty planning studies and revision
- uncertainty how much time to spend on a given task

Challenges for Students with Autistic Spectrum Condition and University

Transitioning to adult life requiring more effort than it would for the average student

- moving away from home for the first time
- time management and establishing routines
- an unfamiliarity with advocating effectively for oneself

Lack of appropriate support

- lack of access to appropriate support right from the start
- a focus on the 'deficits' of autism, rather than the strengths students can bring
- lack of consistency in reasonable adjustments, autism-specific services and personal support

Arguably many of these are challenges for any new student. But while most can adapt reasonably quickly and draw from the support of their friends, for students with Autistic Spectrum Condition these challenges can rapidly lead to anxiety, further isolation, depression and eventually they may drop out from their course of study completely.

This is clearly an immense loss as many Autistic Spectrum Condition students have particular strengths to offer, e.g. strong dedication to their chosen study subject, attention to detail, a high work ethic and a propensity to thinking rationally and logically.

Support for Students

Timely and relevant support is a key factor in retention for students with Autistic Spectrum Condition in higher education and those students who receive appropriate support at the right time thrive at university. Their skills and expertise are recognised and they have access to lectures and library facilities to support their special interests and other opportunities that enable them to grow and develop.

It is important to acknowledge that although behavioural characteristics may be shared by Autistic Spectrum Condition students, their profiles, personalities and requirements will all differ. Some students may not require much support, some students may require support but are reluctant to discuss their diagnosis and others may be more than happy to discuss the impact of Autistic Spectrum Condition on their studies.

There are likely to be elements of their studies and university life where Autistic Spectrum Condition students will struggle if unassisted. A holistic approach to support is strongly recommended, one that makes the environment less disabling for students with Autistic Spectrum Condition.

It is important to identify when and how the support is needed and it is particularly important to provide this before the course starts, during the first few weeks of the course and at any time when change is occurring (e.g. placements, field trips, timetable changes, exams).

It is good practice to monitor and re-assess support as situations change and some students can develop bigger problems at later stages, e.g. when trying to do thesis work.

Support for Students

A positive attitude towards students with Autistic Spectrum Condition is essential, as is realistic and unambiguous information about the type of support available. Without the support, there is a lot of evidence to suggest that students with Autistic Spectrum Condition drop out of university, fail their exams or leave feeling unhappy, isolated and let down.

Support for students who require adjustments will usually be determined by a specialist assessor who will carry out a full assessment of study needs. This will be arranged as part of the students' application for the **Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA)**. This grant is awarded to full-time and some part-time or postgraduate students whose disability impacts on their studies.

(For further information about the Disabled Students' Allowance, please see the Student Services website.)

A named advisor in Disability Services will liaise with the student about this process. Their aim is to make contact with the student as early as possible, to guide them through the DSA application and assessment and also to look at other support on offer at the University.

UK Students can apply for support as soon as they have named their firm choice of university, even if later they end up going to a different institution. They should be encouraged to apply for Disabled Students' Allowance and any other support as soon as they make that choice rather than waiting until they arrive at university.

Support for Students

Typical DSA recommendations may include:

- specialist equipment and software to assist with the production of course work in a place where distractions and stimuli are limited
- a study mentor to support the student in organising and prioritising their work load, to ensure they have understood and addressed the assignment questions, to assist with interaction with academic staff where necessary, to support the student to understand Higher Education conventions etc.
- a support worker/study buddy to assist with familiarisation of the campus and establishing a new routine
- note-taking support to ensure that the student has a full and accurate account of the lectures
- adjustments to teaching and learning situations such as advance access to teaching materials/presentations, support in group work situations, guidance about assignment briefs at the initial stages
- library support such as an extended loan period or an individual induction

“Having a mentor has helped me at Huddersfield as I feel I have someone to talk to about things that I find difficult.”

**Adam J Lockwood - Molecular & Cellular
Biology**

Living and Studying with Autism

Support for Students

Support is repeatedly and widely advertised to all students, explaining what is available and who can apply. Disability Services can help students with their applications, but only if students know Disability Services exists and that students with Autistic Spectrum Condition are eligible to receive appropriate support.

“Asperger's can often feel like a social inhibition. Having people who are formally present who understand your neurological-diversity and can assist you to integrate within a system and identify and support any problems that arise, are imperative when dealing with studies. Huddersfield is more than competent at delivering this support.”

Melanie Wallwork - English Literature with Creating Writing

In addition to the support provided through the DSA, students with Autistic Spectrum Condition would benefit from the following recommendations or support:

- Transition into Higher Education
- Disclosure and confidentiality
- Living away from home
- Learning and teaching situations
- Coursework assessments
- Exams
- Placements/Field Trips/Work Experience
- Presentations
- On the campus

Living and Studying with Autism

Support for Students

Transition into Higher Education

The start of a new course can be a very stressful time for Autistic Spectrum Condition students as it involves a lot of change and the need to become familiar with new routines and environments.

Visits to the campus prior to the start of the course can assist students with the familiarisation process and avoid the need for students to visualise the campus in the abstract. It is beneficial to offer as many visits as the student requests and also combine these with the opportunity to meet staff from Disability Services, the Academic Department, Computing & Library Services etc. These visits are often organised by Disability Services or take place to coincide with Open Days.

The student may have a number of queries and questions about the course, the University and the local area before they start. It may prove useful for them to have a telephone or email contact through which these questions can be filtered. The student may require guidance on the length and frequency of emails and how to frame the questions they would like to ask.

Disability Services organises an **Induction Day** for disabled students before welcome week. This offers students the opportunity to meet other disabled students, find out about what is on offer through Student Services, find out about wider services on offer at the University, undertake a campus tour and enrol on their course in a dedicated enrolment session. Students who have disclosed Autistic Spectrum Condition to the University will receive an invitation to this event.

Living and Studying with Autism

Support for Students

Transition into Higher Education

Early support on the course so that the student can become familiar with the location of teaching rooms, toilets, cafes etc. is beneficial. Provision of a clear timetable at the earliest opportunity and an explanation of when and how they will be notified of any changes, is likely to lead to a feeling of security. This is especially true if the timetable differs each week or there is a two-week timetable.

Disclosure and confidentiality

The University strongly encourages students to disclose their disability in order that appropriate support arrangements can be made. Disclosure can be made to any member of staff. It is important that a student disclosing an Autistic Spectrum Condition is allowed enough time and is provided with a safe atmosphere in which to disclose. The information should be treated with sensitivity.

Some students with Autistic Spectrum Condition may not classify themselves as disabled. Some may be reluctant to disclose due to anxieties about stigma or discrimination they have faced in the past. Others may not want to disclose and take this opportunity as a fresh start. These individuals may still require some assistance and a supportive environment and it is important that we do what we can to achieve this.

A number of students with an autistic spectrum condition have not been diagnosed by the time they start university, especially female and gender non-conforming students.

Living and Studying with Autism

Support for Students

Disclosure and confidentiality

It is recommended that you proceed with caution if you feel a student may have an Autistic Spectrum Condition or is behaving in a way which raises your concern. A student may react negatively to the suggestion that they have undiagnosed Autistic Spectrum Condition. It may be advisable for you to discuss what you have witnessed but not to draw any conclusions. (e.g. “I noticed that another student became upset by what you said to them” or “I am concerned that you have not answered part of the question on your assignment but written more words than you were asked to”.) You could let the student know that support may be available through Wellbeing and Disability Services and let them know how to get in touch with the appropriate staff.

Informed consent must be given by a student with Autistic Spectrum Condition before staff can share information with a third party. The University asks students to sign a Disability Services Registration Form before information is passed on to appropriate individuals or agencies regarding an individual’s support. Disability Services will be able to tell you if a specific student has given their consent or not.

“At times I have a tendency to assume people's actions are based on logic not emotions, thinking of them more of robots instead of people.”

Adam J Lockwood - Molecular and Cellular Biology

Living and Studying with Autism

Support for Students

Living away from home

Family input is often crucial for Autistic Spectrum Condition students in managing their studies and daily routines. You may be required to balance a level of parental involvement with expressed wishes of the student and the University procedures regarding confidentiality. Parents are often more heavily involved at the start of the course.

Many students with Autistic Spectrum Condition will experience difficulties with social interaction and making friends. They may be perceived as 'strange' by others and find it hard to fit in as a result. This can lead to loneliness and isolation. In some cases there can be more serious consequences such as depression, acute anxiety and total withdrawal from University life.

The emphasis should not be totally on the student with Autistic Spectrum Condition to make changes to their behaviour, as they may find this difficult to do and may not understand why they are called on to make a change, rather than others being asked to make a change too.

It is important that staff act as a role model in interaction with Autistic Spectrum Condition students to encourage empathy and respect from other students. It might be appropriate to talk to the student and ask if their peers can be informed about their 'diagnosis' and the effect it has on their capacity to interact with others. It is essential that you remain vigilant for bullying and discriminatory behaviour.

Living and Studying with Autism

Support for Students

Living away from home

It might assist a student with Autistic Spectrum Condition to know that all first year students are likely to be feeling nervous – they may look and act like they are having a good time, but this might not be the case.

“My Asperger Syndrome affects me in subtle ways, affecting my moods and my thoughts which are difficult for others to understand.”

Adam J Lockwood - Molecular and Cellular Biology

It is beneficial to make students aware of other sources of support which can assist them to maintain good mental health. This may include wellbeing support, mental health support, counselling services, workshops and support groups, Student Union clubs and societies, Student Union Advice Centre, the Sports Centre, The Faith Centre etc.

Living and Studying with Autism

Support for Students

Living away from home

Providing information about local facilities and amenities can help reduce the feeling of loneliness and anxiety about how to structure their time. This can include a wide range of information:

Local facilities – location of shops and supermarkets, banks, local cinemas, cheap cafes, pubs and clubs, local attractions etc. Assistance with how to find out what's on and when may also be useful.

Health & Hygiene – how to register with the GP/dentist, laundry services, the importance of eating regular meals as some Autistic Spectrum Condition students can forget to eat, advice on a balanced diet etc.

Travel – local bus services, taxi ranks, train services, location of the nearest bus stop, what to do if you miss a bus etc.

Accommodation – staff availability in the accommodation, how to contact the people who offer support, conventions of sharing student accommodation, how to use the microwave etc.

Budgeting – advice and guidance about living on a limited income, allocating money to cover the differing living costs (utilities/study materials/food/social events etc.)

Clubs and societies – structured opportunities for activities are useful in supporting the student to structure their week. This can often be done during Fresher's Week but the student may require some support with this so they do not over-fill their timetable or have unrealistic expectations of the activities.

Living and Studying with Autism

Support for Students

Learning and teaching situations

Consistency is one of the key elements of support for students with Autistic Spectrum Condition. Students will benefit from classrooms and lecture times remaining the same each week wherever possible. It is also important to keep to agreed times and places for meetings. A student with Autistic Spectrum Condition can often be depended upon for their punctuality and reliability.

Obviously, there are times when changes are unavoidable and the student will be in a better position to deal with this if they can have as much notification as possible. Where it is not possible to provide advance warning (e.g. an emergency room change, staff illness), let the student know who to contact or what action will be taken to let them know the alternative arrangements (e.g. a note will be posted on the door of the original classroom). This will significantly reduce the student's anxiety.

It is important to use clear, straightforward and unambiguous language when delivering a lecture/seminar and when producing written hand outs/assignments/exams. Jokes, puns, jargon, sarcasm and sayings may lead to confusion and misunderstanding.

"I find it difficult to ask my tutors for help. I get scared because I don't know how to explain myself. And when I do ask, the interaction is so awkward, I can't concentrate on what my tutors have said."

Gemma Rothwell - English with Creative Writing

Living and Studying with Autism

Support for Students

Learning and teaching situations

Students may have a rigid understanding of how lectures and seminars are delivered and may feel uncomfortable if, for example, a lecture contains a lot of discussion. This does not mean that you cannot schedule discussion into a lecture - but just let the student know in advance that you will be doing this.

Study at University level requires a lot more self-direction and can feel more 'unsupervised' for students, but this can be especially true and daunting for students with Autistic Spectrum Condition. Establishing clear course conventions with the student is beneficial e.g. when course material will appear on UniLearn, how course work deadlines will be communicated to them etc.

Students may also need to be supported in considering what is the best time for them to carry out private study, where is the best place for them to study, what schedules they need to set for themselves in order to meet course deadlines, what equipment or materials they require, when to take breaks etc. Academic staff or a Study Mentor could encourage the student to plan with these issues in mind.

Some students with Autistic Spectrum Condition may not ask for help, others may make extraordinary demands on your time. In both situations, it will greatly assist the student if regular checks can be made on their academic progress. It is beneficial to be clear that help is available and at what times a student can come to your office to discuss their requirements. Saying things like "call in at anytime" may result in long, frequent visits. It may be preferable to establish regular meetings to discuss academic progress. In some cases, the student may prefer email communication to face to face conversation.

Living and Studying with Autism

Support for Students

Learning and teaching situations

It may be useful if there is a named member of staff who the student can contact or a small group of staff able to offer support on a regular basis. The latter may be beneficial to both the staff and the student to avoid over-dependency on one person and over-burdening one member of staff with the task of providing the entire range of support for the student.

Where possible, it is important to discuss any inappropriate behaviour or difficulties in private with an Autistic Spectrum Condition student. There is a myth that people with Autistic Spectrum Condition cannot be embarrassed or feel deep levels of emotion.. They may not be able to express their embarrassment; however they could be feeling it and become upset if undue attention is drawn to them in a public arena.

Some Autistic Spectrum Condition students carry out ritualised behaviours such as lining up their pens in a particular order at the start of a lecture. This behaviour should not impact on other people and may have a calming effect on the student. It would be unreasonable to expect a student to cease this activity and it is also useful if we do not classify this kind of behaviour as difficult or disruptive.

Learning styles vary across all students and there is evidence to suggest that Autistic Spectrum Condition students benefit from multi-sensory strategies during taught sessions. Some Autistic Spectrum Condition students have very well developed visual memory skills and may benefit from the use of visual aids such as colours, diagrams, graphs and mind-mapping techniques.

Living and Studying with Autism

Support for Students

Learning and teaching situations

Provision of hand outs in advance of taught sessions can benefit those students who struggle to identify 'key' elements of the lecture and for those students who have difficulties processing verbal information.

Some students attempt to write down every aspect of the lecture as they do not recognise the significant points. In doing this they may have missed out on an overall understanding of the lecture and where it fits into the module they are studying. In addition to the provision of hand outs, some students may benefit from recording the lectures.

Many students with Autistic Spectrum Condition (and those without) will benefit from a quick summary of the content of the session at the end of a lecture to ensure they have grasped the salient points.

The environment may play a part in the student's ability to take in taught information – for example if many students are talking around them, the noise level may affect their ability to process information. Bright lights may make the classroom very uncomfortable or the hum of a heating system may be very distracting.

Some students may need to identify the best place for them to sit in the classroom to avoid distraction or sensory overload. Some students may wish to position themselves near an exit so that in times of stress or sensory overload, they can leave the teaching room and return when they feel more composed.

Living and Studying with Autism

Support for Students

Learning and teaching situations

Students with Autistic Spectrum Condition may not join in group discussions without being brought in by you or they may try to withdraw altogether. You may need to ask direct questions to make them a part of the conversation.

Some students may dominate discussions and be uninterested in what others have to contribute. You may have to be vigilant to ensure they stick to the subject matter and you could use questions to bring them back on track or direct question to other students.

If either of these situations occur frequently, a quick one to one conversation with the student about the conventions of discussions may be appropriate (guidance about when and how to ask questions, guidance on when to speak and when to allow others to voice their opinions etc.).

Students with Autistic Spectrum Condition can also bring a unique dimension to discussions as they may have a different way of thinking and experiencing the world.

“I don't find small talk interesting and therefore find it difficult to interact with my peers at times. I much prefer to talk about a subject.”

Adam J Lockwood - Molecular and Cellular Biology

Living and Studying with Autism

Support for Students

Learning and teaching situations

Group work can be an uncomfortable experience for students with Autistic Spectrum Condition due to difficulties with social interaction. They may find it difficult to understand why group work is an essential part of the course and this may need careful explanation. They may also find it difficult to rely on others to complete their part of a group project, particularly if they feel the other students will not complete the work thoroughly or use methods that differ from their preferred style. Some may experience a social awkwardness if students are asked to 'get themselves' into groups.

Some Autistic Spectrum Condition students may not participate in the group activities if they are uninterested in the topic, believe the tasks to be too easy or feel inhibited about speaking in front of others. Other students may not see the 'point' in the task and again this will need careful explanation.

It may be beneficial to ask the student if they would give their permission for their group work colleagues to know about their preferred ways of working. It is also useful to establish group work protocols or ground rules to encourage group consensus and team working. Issues that could be addressed through ground rules may include punctuality, attending meetings arranged by the group, roles for each participant, working to deadlines, strategies for addressing issues/difficulties that arise, turn-taking in discussion, equality of work-load etc.

If an alternative to the group work is available and does not impact on the academic outcomes, then this may be worth considering.

Living and Studying with Autism

Support for Students

Learning and teaching situations

Some Autistic Spectrum Condition students find that they have enrolled on a course that is not what they expected or that they are more suited to a different course. The student needs to be made aware of how flexible the University systems are with regard to changing course and what the time scale is for this. The student would also benefit from knowing whether time-out from the course is an option and what support exists for them to re-join the course.

Coursework Assessments

As most students with Autistic Spectrum Condition appreciate structure, it is important to make clear arrangements for coursework deadlines.

On occasions, students will require extensions for coursework as estimating how much time an activity takes can be problematic for some, as can selecting relevant information to include and leave out of assignments. If the student requires an extension, aim not to leave this open ended, but provide a further deadline date.

Some students may need a brief explanation about the difference between formative and summative assignments or the weight of the mark for the project and also simply to emphasise whether there are consequences if the assignment is not complete or handed in on time.

Living and Studying with Autism

Support for Students

Coursework assessments

It may be necessary to explain the conventions of assignments, including the importance of answering all parts of the question and demonstrating your full knowledge of the subject. Some students may have a tendency to answer only the part of the assignment that holds their interest or write 2500 words on one aspect of the essay and 500 on another where they are required to give equal consideration to both areas. Some students may spend many hours on a piece of work and produce an assignment that exceeds the word limit, so they will need to be made aware that a proportion of their assignment may not be marked.

You could also make contact with the Study Mentor to discuss these issues and together you could work with the student in developing their study skills.

There is a positive side to this as a number of Autistic Spectrum Condition students will dedicate more hours to the production of their work than other students and may produce high quality assignments.

Some Autistic Spectrum Condition students may find it difficult to produce what is considered to be a well structured piece of work that follows the pattern of an introduction, a series of arguments/ideas and then a conclusion. They may become absorbed or side-tracked by a detail in their argument.

As with all other students, the importance of planning assignments and proof-reading should be emphasised in these circumstances.

Living and Studying with Autism

Support for Students

Coursework Assessments

It may be useful to ask some Autistic Spectrum Condition students to write for a specific 'reader' or 'recipient' as they may not understand the point in demonstrating their knowledge to a tutor - as staff already know the information. For example, students could be asked to write for a person who has enough knowledge to make sense of the coursework; however this person is not an expert. They will therefore be required to demonstrate their knowledge and not make assumptions that the person marking the work will already know the subject matter in depth.

Some Autistic Spectrum Condition students struggle with elements of assignments that require them to be analytical, apply knowledge, make comparisons or subjectively interpret information. Clear guidance on why a set piece requires this way of working is beneficial. You may need to offer clear definitions of what is meant by terms used in assignments such as 'compare', 'analyse' or 'interpret'. There may also be times when you need to offer further clarification on assignment briefs. If an assignment asks a student to 'analyse a short piece of text from...', some students may need guidance on what is meant by 'short'.

The student may benefit from working with a Study Mentor or Academic Skills Tutor on these skills.

Guided or modified reading lists may be helpful in supporting students to cover the range of topics on their course without veering too far from the central subject area. It is also useful to indicate which reading is essential and which is less important.

Living and Studying with Autism

Support for Students

Coursework assessments

Some students with Autistic Spectrum Condition have difficulties in interpreting feedback about their assignments unless it is very specific. It is beneficial to highlight where the student has met the criteria for the assignment and why, in addition to drawing attention to areas for improvement. If a student does not receive positive feedback, they may have the impression that they have not met any of the criteria of the assignment. The feedback for areas where they have not met the criteria should be constructive, demonstrating to what extent they have not met the targets and how the student could improve this.

You may need to be very explicit in your comments. Phrases such as 'Your argument is not balanced' or 'You have not answered the question' are likely to leave the student wondering exactly what the difficulty is and unable to improve their next assignment.

The definition of plagiarism may need to be explained clearly to some Autistic Spectrum Condition students. Students may have difficulties in putting ideas or research into their own words. They may not understand why they cannot use the phrases that someone else has written in their research material, if it clearly explains the point they are trying to make. In these circumstances, it is beneficial to give a clear definition of what constitutes plagiarism, what the consequences are if a student plagiarises other work and how to avoid this by, for example, making notes and then closing the text book/website etc. before writing the essay.

Living and Studying with Autism

Support for Students

Exams

Exams are stressful for all students, but this is particularly true for students with Autistic Spectrum Condition. The timetable they have got used to has changed, as have the arrangements for all the other regular routines.

Arrangements may need to be made for the provision of a separate room or a room with limited distractions and additional time to reduce the stress. The provision in advance of the layout and location of the room will provide the student with the opportunity to pre-prepare. They may also need someone to explain any rules and regulations that they have to follow before during and after the exam – even down to small details such as whether treasury tags are used to keep the papers together. Any action we can take to reduce the unknown is beneficial.

Exam questions and instructions should be unambiguous and the format of the paper should be clear. It may be useful to provide examples of previous exams/in class tests papers to demonstrate the way questions are worded and the layout of the paper.

The student may require the provision of an amanuensis (scribe), reader or prompter for each exam in order to keep them focused on the task and to support them to allocate specific amounts of time to each section of the exam.

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Support for Students

Exams

If a student is expected to take oral examinations, some requirements may need to be discussed. Of particular interest is what information will be passed to the examiner about things that could affect the student's performance; such as the student's usual eye contact and body language, whether the student has a particular style of speech, phrasing questions in a very explicit manner etc.

Disability Services will inform University staff (via the Personal Learning Support Plan) of the support recommended to each student in terms of the exam arrangements and support worker provision. However, the academic school and invigilators will need to consider the environment, the examination conventions and other aspect of the accessibility of the exam for each student.

Placements/Field Trips/Work Experience

Any change to a regular routine may prove very stressful for a student with Autistic Spectrum Condition. It is very important to allow sufficient time for the student to plan ahead for placements, field trips etc. Many students will require quite intensive support in securing a placement or work experience.

The opportunity to visit the placement or location of the field trip where possible would benefit the student in their preparations, as would as much information about the placement/field trip/work experience as possible.

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Support for Students

Placements/Field Trips/Work Experience

Prior to a placement, the student may require support in preparing their CV, writing application letters, preparing for interview etc. They may need to be informed about the conventions of job application procedures.

Some students with Autistic Spectrum Condition may limit their placement options by hoping to secure one specific placement. It is useful to explain that they are more likely to secure a placement if they widen rather than reduce their options.

The student may require some adjustments to be made to a placement interview where possible, such as making the interviewee(s) aware that they have Autistic Spectrum Condition, allowing additional time for the interview, allowing the opportunity to pre-prepare using the interview questions.

Adjustments during the placement may also be useful including a named supervisor/a small team of supervisors within the work setting, very clear instructions and what action to take if they are unsure or unable to carry out their instructions, clear guidance on start and finish times, support to establish a routine for lunch breaks and information about travel to the placement.

Placement and work experience preparation can be carried out jointly by the student, the department, Disability Services and in many circumstances the work based learning provider. The advisor in the Careers and Employability Service, who has a remit to work with disabled students, is also available for additional advice and guidance on the subject of work placement and experience.

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Support for Students

Presentations

If a student is required to give an oral presentation as part of their course, this may present difficulties for them. Their anxiety levels may increase as they are expected to stand in front of an audience, deliver information, make eye contact, answer questions from the audience which they may not be able to anticipate and generally demonstrate a competent level of social communication.

Where possible, it may benefit a student to rehearse their presentation, be scheduled to present first or last or present to a reduced number of people. A student may feel more comfortable if they can be accompanied by a support worker to the presentation. Consideration could also be given to an alternative to the presentation - if this does not compromise the learning outcomes.

On the campus

Due to heightened sensory perception, some students may find certain areas of the campus difficult to deal with or even unbearable. This might include the Student Union shop due to the level of noise or uncomfortable jostling in queues; canteen and cafe areas due to the smells or study areas due to the bright lighting or students chatting.

There could be obvious problems if the student avoids these areas such as reduced interaction with their peers, not eating well if the student is not yet able to cook for themselves in their accommodation or not finding suitable areas to carry out their studies.

The student may need to take certain action in order to remain in these areas such as sitting in the corner or wearing ear phones in order to reduce the sensory stimulation.

What can you do?

- Request and undergo training in supporting students with Autistic Spectrum Condition
- Discuss training needs with other staff members, e.g. tutors and lecturers, who work with Autistic Spectrum Condition students
- If you have already had training, share your knowledge with colleagues
- Advocate for the adoption of accessible and uniform assessment practices at the university, in order to ensure equal treatment for all students
- Critically examine the support and information offered to Autistic Spectrum Condition students, and compare it to descriptions of good practice from other HEIs and countries
- Encourage students to understand the positive aspects of Autistic Spectrum Condition (that are specific to them) for their academic life and beyond, and their personal strengths
- Encourage students to review the support they receive regularly, making it clear they will not be left without support if they are critical of their current provision
- Be aware that students with Autistic Spectrum Condition may find some commonly used terminology inaccurate, insulting or discouraging, and that preferences may vary both individually and depending on country and region; consider the tone you set by using 'challenge' instead of 'difficulty', 'limitation' or 'difference' instead of 'disability', 'autistic characteristics' or 'autistic condition' instead of 'autistic disorder', 'support' instead of 'treatment'