
Supporting Students with Asperger's Syndrome



A Physical Sciences Practice Guide

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The views expressed in this practice guide are those of the authors
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Preface

This resource pack grew out of our experience of supporting students with Asperger's Syndrome (AS) in the School of Physics, Astronomy & Mathematics at the University of Hertfordshire (UH). It grew from a chance conversation. After struggling to find the best support strategy for a particular student with AS, one of the authors asked the student's mother what information was out there to avoid us having to 're-invent the wheel'. The student's mother replied that we were not in fact re-inventing, but rather *inventing* the wheel. This eventually developed into a desire to find out what support students with AS are actually getting in the physical sciences in the UK, indeed how much do staff know about Asperger's Syndrome? Moreover, if we at UH were developing support strategies, then so too must other universities, so what are they doing? We sent out an initial survey, and though not rigorous, it quickly became clear that there was a strong desire from academics to get additional support to help their students with AS. Moreover, it was also apparent that there were other places that were developing excellent support in-house.

One of the things that we learnt in our experience is the vital importance of having good communication between disability support units and academic departments. Academics know their subject, how it is taught and examined. Disability professionals understand how to support people with Asperger's Syndrome. Students with AS do not just need disability support, *they need support to prosper in the academic environment of their school/department*. This means that to be successful, both inputs (departmental and disability unit) are invaluable. Recognising this, the project is principally the work of two members from the School of Physics, Astronomy & Mathematics (Hughes & McCall) and two disability professionals from the Faculty Disability Unit (Milne & Pepper).

This guide is the result of the desire to improve the situation of students with AS, and the staff supporting them. Its aim is to provide the academic who has little or no experience of AS, with a helping hand. It should not be taken as the final answer, and indeed we hope that one day someone will see fit to expand, revise and replace this guide with a more up-to-date and comprehensive version. This is why we call this resource pack the '1st Edition'. Undoubtedly new ideas will emerge about best practice. But we hope that this resource pack will provide a starting point, to enable academics to help students with AS achieve the degree that genuinely befits their intellectual capabilities, rather than one that simply reflects the difficulties faced by their condition.

1st Edition (Jan 2009)

Editors

Mark Hughes¹ Victoria Milne
Alan McCall Sylvia Pepper

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1. Now at the School of Physics & Astronomy, University of Manchester (email: Mark.Hughes@manchester.ac.uk)

How to use this Resource Pack

This resource pack consists of 3 parts:

- (1) A collection of **Quick Guides** to hand out to staff in your department. These are designed to inform people quickly of the issues concerning Asperger's Syndrome (AS), and contain useful advice.
- (2) A **booklet** containing useful background information on supporting students with Asperger's Syndrome in the Physical Sciences (this booklet).
- (3) A **DVD** containing an interview with Peter Griffin, a successful former undergraduate/postgraduate from the University of Hertfordshire. Peter has Asperger's Syndrome and this DVD provides a window into his experience at university.

You can request further copies of any of the above from the UK Physical Sciences Centre (psc@hull.ac.uk).

This resource pack is created in a 'dip in' format. You can choose which components are relevant for your School/Department and use them accordingly.

A typical use of this resource pack might involve the following:

1. **Hand out the Quick Guides** to all relevant staff members.
2. Consider making a member of staff an '**Asperger's Syndrome Academic Contact**' (or make the recommendation to your head of School/Department). A description of this role is explained in this booklet.
3. At your next staff meeting **show the video interview** (on the DVD) to give staff an insight into the issues faced (and solutions found), for a successful student with Asperger's Syndrome.
4. **Dip into this resource booklet**. It is designed to be read in any order, so simply pick a section that is of interest to you. Consider ordering more copies of this book for any other members of staff who are interested.

What is Asperger's Syndrome?

Victoria Milne & Sylvia Pepper, University of Hertfordshire

Asperger's Syndrome (AS) is a condition on the Autistic Spectrum. People with AS can experience difficulties with **flexibility of thought, social and emotional interaction** and **language and communication**. These areas of difficulties are often referred to as the Triad of Impairments. People with AS will not necessarily display all of these characteristics and symptoms will vary greatly between individuals, but the triad can be treated as a basis for understanding the syndrome.

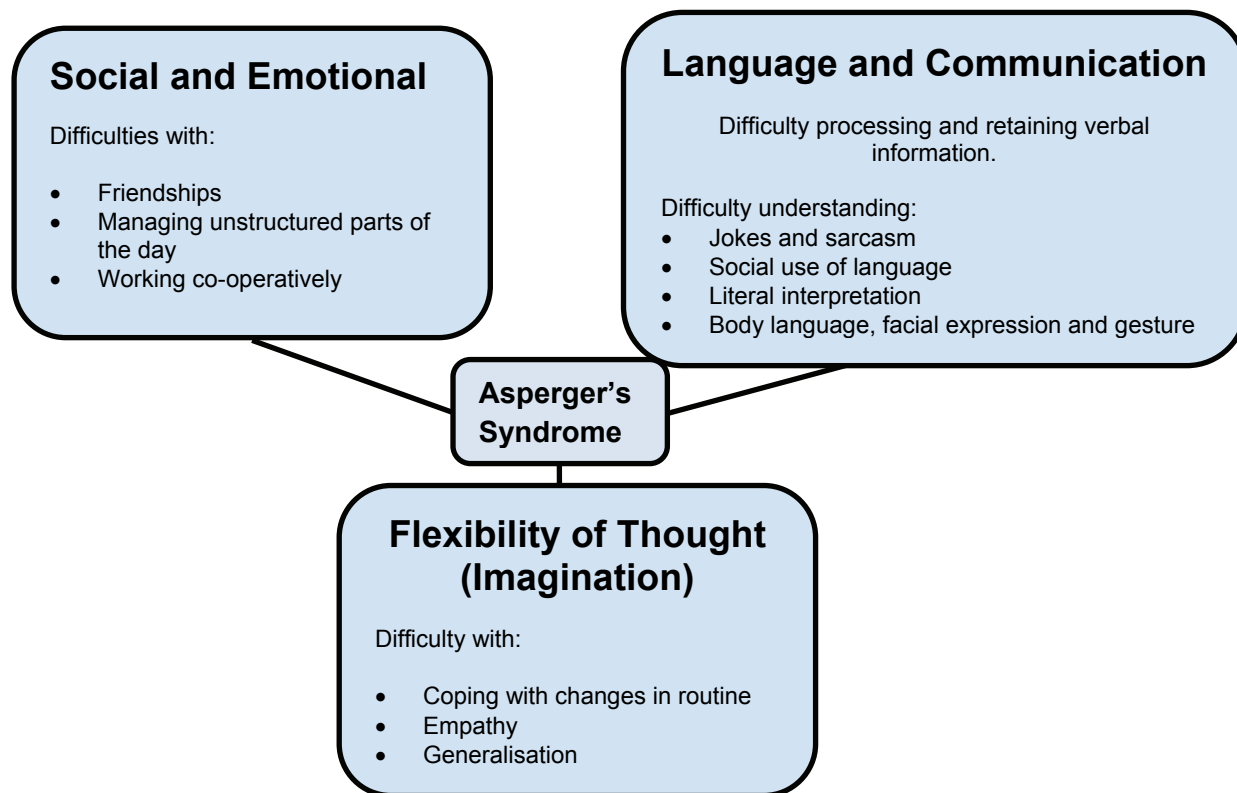


Figure 1. The difficulties faced by someone with Asperger's Syndrome. (Taken and adapted from the National Autistic Society Website, originally by Lorna Wing and Judith Gould 1979)

Although Asperger's Syndrome is on the autistic spectrum, it can often appear to be a completely different condition to 'classic' autism, especially in students with AS who reach university. The diagnostic difference between AS and classic autism relates to IQ; people with AS are usually of average or above average intelligence. They may also have good verbal skills and are very often capable of leading full and independent lives unlike those with classic autism. People with AS may become very focused on an activity or subject area that they enjoy. This can lead to significant productivity if the activity is related to their work but can be socially restrictive if the area of interest is not a popular one. Areas of intense interest can also be all consuming and can take up a great deal of an individual's time. People with AS may find it difficult to empathise or to know what others are thinking, finding other people unpredictable and confusing. This may lead to difficulties with social interaction as so much communication relies on non-verbal cues. People with AS may not have a full understanding of the unwritten rules which guide our behaviour. They may not pick up on, subtle social cues such as body language and facial expressions. It is uncommon for people with AS to use non verbal communication in the same way as people without the condition. This can often lead to people misinterpreting their feelings or intentions as we rely so heavily on social cues. This lack of empathy can lead to difficulties in working within a group situation. All of this means that life can be hard for people with AS. The condition affects every aspect of their lives and this can result in associated anxiety or depression.

It is important to remember that people with AS should be treated as individuals with unique personalities. Each person has their own individual set of strengths and weaknesses; the key to supporting someone with AS is finding out how best to reduce the impact of the difficulties.

Asperger's Syndrome - Peter's Story

Peter Griffin¹ & Ann Griffin

Peter Griffin is a successful former student of the University of Hertfordshire, having gained both a bachelor's and a master's degree in astrophysics. Peter has Asperger's Syndrome, so what was his experience of the condition and its effects on university life?

How does Asperger's Syndrome affects your daily life?

Peter: That's a tricky question as I only know what it is like to have Asperger's Syndrome! It is very difficult for me to make qualitative comparisons.

Ann (Peter's mother): Mainly Peter is affected by his social interaction, social communication difficulties. He may not be sure what questions he should be asking - what feedback he is getting from people. He's not very good on social cues and social niceties - facial expressions and things like that. But he's also very inflexible on how he does things on a day to day basis. So if Monday is his day for doing something, then Monday it is, and it is very difficult to move him away from that if you wanted him to do something else on a Monday. These are the main things that would impact on his daily life.

*If I don't have
experience doing
such a thing, how
can I make a
judgement?*

Structure is very important to you?

Peter: Yes, I'm particularly disorganised. Speaking personally, it's very important for me to have that structure in place as it gives me something I can focus on. If it's something I've done repeatedly it is a lot easier for me to remember. It helps if I have things done in a set way, otherwise I will forget to do them. One of the big changes from school to university is that at school you are there from 9 to 4 every day of the week, and you have lessons pretty much throughout. At university you are a lot more independent, you have lectures here and there. You have long periods where you are doing nothing. It is up to you to make sure you get into university - there is no daily register that you have to take part in. It is your responsibility to turn up to lectures, it is your responsibility to remember what homework you are supposed to be doing and to hand it in. I struggled with that sort of thing.

Had you already been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome when you entered University?

Peter: No. I was 19 when I was diagnosed. But this is not something I suddenly got. It is something I had from the day I was born, and it is something I will have until the day I die - it is not something that goes away. The big problem was that when I was young they were not really diagnosing it, whereas now they are. And so you are seeing a lot more people coming through with Asperger's and other associated problems. There are probably lots of adults out there who have it and don't even realise. You know, they're a little bit eccentric, a little bit odd. A lot of the time they will not do particularly well, unless they can find their niche in which they will thrive. That is the big thing about someone with Asperger's Syndrome; if you find something they are interested in, they will really go after it.

*If I wasn't entirely
sure what I was
supposed to be
doing, I did nothing,
rather than be
wrong.*

How important was parental support during your time at university?

Peter: Very. Partly due to that I am very disorganised, but also because I tended to separate home from university. When I was at home I didn't think much about university- what assignments I had to do etc. My mum could make sure I had actually done an assignment and hadn't just left it until later which is one of the bad habits I picked up when I was young.

Ann: When Peter talks about his 'bad habits', I call them strategies for dealing with every day life. Because he is bright - and a lot of people with Asperger's are above average intelligence - they can use strategies to mask what is going on with them. So when he says 'bad habits' I'd like to think of them as strategies that got him through school.

¹ Transcribed, edited and paraphrased from the video interview on the accompanying DVD.

Supporting Students with Asperger's Syndrome

A lot of students will be away from home for the first time, how important do you think it is to have contact between the parent of the student with Asperger's Syndrome and the department?

Peter: It can depend on the particular student. Some might want that, and some might not. I personally found it useful, that my mum knew what I was supposed to be doing and she would come with me when I had to meet certain people because sometimes I didn't know how to answer a question.

Ann: One of the things that Peter touched on there was going to meetings with different lecturing staff. I would go as his advocate rather than his mother. Most of the time we came out of those meetings with agreements on the way forward to achieve things.

Peter: I think it was important for me that I didn't feel trapped. I could take a step back if necessary. That is what you find with a lot of people with AS, sometimes they can get overloaded. They don't like it when they are bombarded with information and they are expected to make snap decisions. I like to think about it, to have time to mull it over for a bit, weigh it up and talk to people whose advice I trust.

Ann: Sometimes Peter would find it hard to make a decision and someone would have to make it for him.

Peter: Again it comes down to the 'experience' thing. If I don't have experience doing such a thing, how can I make a judgement? I can remember being given a list of third year projects and I didn't know which one to choose, because I didn't know what any of them entailed, whether I would enjoy them or whether I would be able to do myself justice with them. Just doing things for the first time generally, I find tough. If you think about coming to university, everything is new. It can be overwhelming if you don't know what you are supposed to be doing.

Ann: When you first start university it is useful to have someone who will buddy you to make sure you are where you meant to be. The beginning of at term at a university is a very noisy lively time that can impact hugely on people with Asperger's Syndrome, because their sensory perception is often higher than ours. In terms of light, sounds, smells, heat, cold, all those things should be taken into account.

Clearly you did succeed, you went on to get a good degree and you have a strong interest in your subject. So what was it that enabled you to be successful at university?

Peter: The support my mentor gave me was invaluable. Not only did he help me structure my day, he knew what coursework I had to do and made sure that my mum was kept 'in the loop'. I could go and see him if I had a problem. When I was doing my third year project I had trouble with the writing, so he got someone with a background in English to help me with the writing.

You've got this degree and a master's degree. What are your plans for the future?

Peter: I'm working on it at the moment. I'm considering teaching because it is something I feel able to do, and I've been mentoring at a local college, supporting students struggling with physics, helping them and giving something back, using the experience I had with my mentor. Knowing what worked with him and trying other things as well. It has given me a nice perspective helping people and being helped.

that is the big thing about someone with Asperger's Syndrome; if you find something they are interested in, they will really go after it.

Typical Academic Scenarios

Victoria Milne, University of Hertfordshire

The student who fails an exam

Despite being relatively successful in his other modules, Paul repeatedly failed the same maths exam. This puzzled his lecturers because he seemed mathematically capable. His mentor was informed of the issue and arranged an appointment for Paul to see the relevant lecturer. The lecturer then decided to take time with Paul to investigate the nature of his problem. It turned out that Paul's mathematical ability was not the issue; he was simply unable to understand exactly what the questions were asking. A short series of weekly tutorials was arranged for Paul to address his problem with the interpretation of questions. Paul then passed his maths exam with a respectable grade.

The student who disrupts the class

Sam was regularly disruptive in lectures. Every time the lecturer asked the class a question, Sam would give a lengthy answer that was often stunningly irrelevant. Wishing to move on with the topic, the lecturer would politely thank Sam for his contribution in an attempt to quieten him down. This indirect approach failed miserably as Sam was unable to 'read between the lines' and ploughed on regardless. As term went on, his class mates, having been sympathetic to begin with, now became frustrated and began to complain. The lecturer contacted Sam's mentor who discussed appropriate class room behaviour with him and then sat in on a few lectures to observe and give Sam reminders when necessary.

The student who disrupts an exam

Daniel sat a Computer Science exam in the extra time room. During the exam, an anxious Daniel continually cleared his throat, muttered to himself, kicked his feet and banged his pen on the desk. This was very distracting and other students in the exam room complained. The Disabled Students' Coordinator was informed of the issue by the exams office and arranged for Daniel to take all further exams in a room with no other students.

The student who misses lectures (1)

A lecturer of a small class noticed that Tim had not attended the last couple of lectures. There had been a change of room two weeks previously and Tim had not checked the internet so was not aware of the room change. The lecturer met Tim by chance and found out why he had missed the lectures: he had been persistently turning up to the old room and waiting for his classmates and lecturer to arrive. The lecturer now realised that in future he needed to make sure that Tim was aware of any change. Tim and his mentor also spent time looking at the university's virtual learning environment and he was given frequent reminders to check for changes.

The student who misses lectures (2)

It had been noticed that Stephen had not attended any of his lectures for a while. He was contacted about his lack of attendance. After some discussion, it was discovered that Stephen had been arriving at the lecture room late. He had not wanted to enter the room when the lecture had already started for fear of attracting attention to himself and so had gone home. Stephen and his study skills tutor worked on a weekly time planner which specified which bus he should catch to arrive at his lectures on time.

The student who never comes to ask for help

Alex was an intelligent, motivated and punctual student but she failed to submit a major piece of coursework which caused her to fail a module. This puzzled her lecturers as she had passed the exam component of the module so her subject knowledge did not seem to be the problem. It was discovered that Alex had experienced a 'mind block' which she could not overcome and therefore missed the deadline. An extension was granted and Alex's study skills tutor was informed. Together they worked on strategies to overcome 'mind blocks'. Alex was reminded that as soon as situations like this arose, she should inform the relevant lecturer and/or her study skills tutor so that the problem could be addressed well before the deadline.

The student who comes to ask for help too often

Justin was a successful student who suffered from great anxiety when doing coursework. He often came to a 'dead end' when working independently and frequently went to see his lecturers for help. As the semester went on, Justin appeared at the lecturer's office more frequently, sometimes more than once a day. The lecturer sensitively explained to the student that he was asking for help too often. Together, they decided that Justin could come to ask for help a maximum of twice a week and could send 3 emails a week to ask simple questions. He also emphasised the importance of independent study at university. Once these 'rules' had been put in place, Justin began to work more independently and when he contacted the lecturer, it was about serious matters.

The student who puzzles his lecturers

The Disabled Students' Coordinator received the following email: "Also, we have one student who is demonstrating rather weird behaviour in classes. He reads the newspaper, stands up and walks in and out of seminars and constantly mutters and plays with drinks cans. He seems pretty unwilling to communicate with us at all and when he does, his manner is rude and abrupt. We are wondering if he has a disability? We are not sure of his name as it is still early days for us getting to know the students." The Disabled Students' Coordinator had met the student and made a Study Needs Agreement with him on which his Asperger's Syndrome was disclosed. The coordinator was therefore able to identify the student and refer the relevant lecturers to the Study Needs Agreement. Some general information on Asperger's Syndrome was also provided.

The student who falls asleep in lectures

Adam was having trouble concentrating in lectures. He often held his head in his hands and sighed and yawned loudly. This became more frequent and on a few occasions he fell asleep on the desk. The lecturer finally decided to approach Adam when they were alone to ask him if he was alright. He found that that Adam had not been sleeping due to noisy flat mates in his halls of residence. This was made worse by the fact that Adam was hypersensitive to sound. His mentor contacted Residential Services about this issue and Adam was able to move to quieter accommodation where he would not be disturbed by other students.

The student who arrives late for lectures

Sue intermittently arrived late for lectures. The lecturer approached Sue about this issue and found out why she had been arriving late. Sue used the bus to get to university and had a strong preference to sit by the window at the front of the bus. When her preferred seat was taken, Sue would simply wait for the next bus to arrive, even though it made her late for lectures. Her mentor was informed about this and together they caught various buses where Sue was gently persuaded to try sitting in other seats. Sue continued to prefer the window seat at the front of the bus but became more flexible about where she sat when travelling to university.

The student who is bullied

Rebecca told her mentor about some flat mates who were being unkind to her. This had been going on for a while. Naturally, Rebecca was very upset by this but was adamant that she did not want to give the names of the students for fear of 'making things worse'. Her mentor told Rebecca about the university's counselling facilities and suggested that she might make an appointment. Rebecca did not know about the counselling service and was keen to make an appointment. She continues to attend weekly sessions.

The student who appears to be rude

One morning, Greg and his good friend were queuing for a coffee together at the café. It was Greg's turn to be served, but before asking for his drink he bellowed 'My gosh you look absolutely terrible!' to the lady behind the counter who looked very tired (and now very annoyed!) Once they had both got their coffees, Greg's friend agreed that the lady looked tired, but explained that his comment had probably embarrassed her and would have come across as being rude. Greg appreciated his friend's honesty.

Ideas for Supporting Students with Asperger's Syndrome

Mark Hughes, Alan McCall, University of Hertfordshire

Here we present a collection of issues that we and others have encountered in supporting students with AS. It is based on our experience of what has worked, what has not, and what we feel might be a better way of tackling various issues. It is likely that this section of the guide will be revised and expanded in any later editions of this resource pack.

Again we remind the reader that every person with Asperger's Syndrome is different, and you should not expect every AS student to act or respond in the same manner.

Regular Contact

- We have found that regular contact with a student with AS can be important. However, we have found that sometimes a student will only approach familiar members of staff, rather than the relevant lecturer for a particular course. You may therefore want to think about arranging 'ice-breaking' events to allow students time to become comfortable talking to all their lecturers.

Planning Ahead

- Although every student is different, there are key stages in any course that might benefit from being considered in advance. Examples might be: the submission of coursework; presentations; exams and revision periods; choice of projects; laboratory write-ups. If you have a student with AS it is worth reviewing your course and considering where possible difficulties might lie, and then liaising with the relevant support person in your department.

For example,

- (1) You have a laboratory course and a formal report needs to be produced by each student. Have you communicated the structure of a good report to the students? If so, would this information also be useful to the mentor of the Student with AS so that additional study skills training can be provided? Knowing what is relevant to include in a report can be difficult for someone with AS.
- (2) You are allocating student final year projects. Is it worth briefing the mentor in advance about the topics so that the AS student can be helped to make an informed decision? Uncertainties about the nature of particular projects could lead to delays in making choices and may result in suitable projects being taken by other students.
- (3) Exams are looming. Perhaps the mentor would benefit from a course syllabus so that he/she could construct a revision timetable for the student with AS? The mentor is unlikely to know your subject but, with a bit of guidance from you, should be able to produce a timetable to help provide structure for the AS student's revision.

We cannot plan for everything, but a little planning can make a big difference to the success of the student.

Registration

- Registration can seem like a daunting time for many students, whether they have AS or not. Everything is new, friends may not have been made yet, and there seems to be an overload of information. Do AS students need to join long queues in a library or other building to get registered? Consider arranging for the AS student to meet with a member of staff or a mentor before the start of the academic year so that they have a friendly face present during registration.

Lectures

- You may notice unusual behaviour in the lecture theatre. Perhaps the student is making disruptive noises or asking so many questions that the lecture is disrupted? If this behaviour disturbs the class and affects the other students, the mentor may be able to work on the issue with the student.
- Absenteeism can be a problem. Keeping track of a class of 200 students in your lectures can be impossible, but if you have identified the few AS students in your lecture room, it can be useful to keep an eye out for them. We have found the causes of absenteeism to be various: one student, may be unable to enter a class if he is late; another, might not attend if he cannot see what he is getting from the lecture. Again, as a lecturer, the best thing you can do in these circumstances is to contact the mentor who can then try to find out the cause of the absenteeism and make suggestions to you.

Coursework/Project Work

- As stated above, we have learnt that when project topics are allocated we should make sure the AS student is fully briefed and makes a decision before the suitable project topics have disappeared.
- Late submission of coursework can be frustrating for the academic, and disastrous for the AS student if it is not recognised early enough. There are 2 key elements to sorting out the issue of missed deadlines: (1) having a system in place so that missed deadlines can be addressed as soon as possible. (The easiest way might be to send a short email to the student's personal tutor or mentor, and (2) trying to understand *why* the student is missing deadlines. This second part is the most difficult. If the issue is simply organisation the mentor should be able to help the AS student with timetabling issues (e.g. drawing up a coursework timetable). (You can assist this process by letting the mentor know of coursework deadlines.) However, in our experience other factors can also come into play: maybe the student does not know how to start the work and so doesn't attempt it; or maybe he is worried about submitting an 'inferior' piece of coursework. None of these issues are easy to tackle, but the mentor should be able to try to address them, and may suggest some study-skills training.
- The 'blank page' syndrome can easily become a problem, especially if a question is open-ended. One approach is to break the questions down into smaller questions that constrain the range of possible answers. However, this may not be best for the student in the long term., It may be that the best approach is to bring in a dedicated English language study skills tutor who might teach how ideas could be thrown onto a page (in a mind map) to get the thinking process going and then refined later.

Group-work

- Assigning students to groups can be a real challenge for the academic. For someone with AS there may be real anxiety about having to work with previously unknown students. Of course, mixing students up, may be an aim of your group-work task (perhaps related to employability skills), but it may be prudent in initial group-work tasks to assign one or two familiar faces to the's group of the student with AS to ease the transition.
- It may also be useful to consider assigning specific roles within the group, so that the student with AS knows exactly what is expected of him e.g. is he the researcher? Or the problem solver?

Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs)

- Virtual Learning Environments are becoming ubiquitous in Higher Education. They offer many advantages in terms of convenience for the modern student. However, we have found specific pitfalls for some students with AS. For example it is easy to believe that all students will check their results, but we have found that some students with AS avoid checking their grades online. You may therefore consider whether it is appropriate to schedule a date to have a chat with the student about results, to ensure that they have been checked and the consequences understood.
- We have also discovered issues with online module selection. The student with AS may be overwhelmed by the process of selecting and registering modules on their own, outside of the university. Again it might be useful to arrange a short discussion with the student to explain their choices and how they should go about making a selection.

Laboratory Work

- Maintaining a lab book is usually considered to be an integral part of any experiment in a physical science degree. Recording enough information so that the experiment could be recreated from the lab book is a skill that needs to be learnt, and, for students with AS, it can be a difficult task to know what information should be recorded. To this end, it is useful if laboratory demonstrators can provide timely hints as the student is undertaking the experiment. For example, the demonstrator might add "Here is a good place to add a diagram of the equipment", or "make sure you make a note of this reading", etc.
- It is particularly helpful if regular feedback on the laboratory book is provided. Try to add constructive written feedback on how the lab book could be improved. Rather than saying "needs more information", try to be specific : "add a diagram of the circuit here", "describe how you determined the mass here" etc. Even better, add a short example of what you would have liked to see in your feedback.
- Make sure Technical Staff are aware of which students in the class have AS (if allowed under your disability agreement with the student). It may be a good idea to introduce the relevant staff to the student so that they become familiar.

Supporting Students with Asperger's Syndrome

- If there are changes made to the laboratory during the academic year that might affect the AS student then let them know in advance - for example, if a piece of equipment that they have normally used is now located in another room.

Tutorials

- As with lectures, it is important to make sure that the student with AS knows in advance of any changes to the schedule and knows when and where tutorials are to take place.
- People with AS don't always know what is expected in a full answer to a question. If a student is providing a terse, or even off-topic answer, consider breaking the problem down into smaller clearly defined chunks.
- If a student with AS is dominating your time in the tutorial, don't be afraid to say "thank you X, let's see what Y thinks the answer is".
- If a student with AS is continually missing your tutorial, make sure you inform the relevant support person.

Exams

- Enabling a student to demonstrate their abilities in an exam environment can be a complex issue. . It is tempting to assume that since a student is struggling with a particular form of examination that the examination itself should be changed (eg using a viva rather than a written examination). However, we feel that the most reasonable adjustment for the student is often to provide additional study skills training to enable them to take the same exams as the other students. The underlying principle is that this should be better for the student in the long term. For example, a student who struggled to produce written work was given some 1-1 study skills support to help him find strategies for getting his ideas down on paper. (This student went on to produce a dissertation.) Another student, who was struggling with a maths exam was provided with some one-to-one tuition, where it was found that he was misreading questions and 'jumping ahead' too quickly. With some advice on the accurate interpretation of questions, the student passed the exam. Another student has persistently failed to show enough working in mathematical answers. We have still have not resolved this issue, but feel that the solution lies in study skills training rather than a change in the exam. In short, we feel that developing a student's skills is likely to be of greater long term benefit than any quick fix changes to exam format.
- With the above in mind, the one change we would suggest is to make sure questions do not use unnecessarily obscure language.

The Experience of Mentoring Students with Asperger's Syndrome

Victoria Milne, University of Hertfordshire

Victoria Milne, a disability professional working in one of the faculty disability units at the University of Hertfordshire, provides an overview of what it is like to be the mentor of students with Asperger's Syndrome.

What is an AS mentor?

The role of mentor at the University of Hertfordshire is usually taken on by a professional working in the Disability Unit. Mentors are unlikely to have a background in the Physical Sciences, but should ideally have some specialist knowledge of Asperger's Syndrome. The role is a diverse one and varies greatly according to the needs of each individual student. The mentor is often the primary support for students with AS and can be involved with both academic and day-to-day practical issues. It is likely that mentors will see students most frequently at the beginning of the first term. They may then remain in contact with the student for the duration of the course, but will usually aim at reducing contact time as the student becomes accustomed to university life. Some AS students will choose not to have a mentor at all while others report that knowing that there is someone there for them helps enormously.

Before the course begins

It is useful if a meeting can be arranged with AS applicants before the start of the course to discuss the areas in which a need for support is anticipated. This meeting might involve the student, his/her parents, a member of the university disability team and, crucially, the mentor. This ensures that when the student arrives at the start of the new term, he will meet someone he already knows which can help significantly in reducing anxiety. Some students with AS choose to have a high level of parental involvement when they start university and, with the student's permission, the mentor can be a useful contact for parents, especially at the beginning of an academic year.

The first week

It is often hard for students to make the transition from the close-knit support system that they may have experienced at school to the more anonymous and independent university environment, so it may be helpful for the mentor to see the student on every day of the first week. Enrolment and registration can be stressful and confusing times for all students as can the noise and bustle of the Fresher's Fair. All this will be particularly challenging for some students with AS who might welcome the presence of the mentor at these events. Once academic timetables are published, mentors may help students to find lecture rooms and to become familiar with the campus generally. Other useful preparation for academic life might involve helping the student to become familiar with the university's virtual learning environment, looking at reading lists and obtaining course textbooks either from the library/Learning Resources Centre or local book shops.

Establishing the Student/Mentor Relationship

Mentors should try to be available by phone, text or email. Some AS students have strong feelings about their preferred method of communication so the mentor needs to be flexible. It is advisable to arrange regular sessions with students so that contact is consistent and reliable, but mentors should be prepared to have ad-hoc meetings with students if 'emergencies' arise. At the same time, it is important to establish boundaries: students should be made aware that sometimes they may have to leave messages or wait until a mentor is available. A mentor may be tempted to over-support students at times, but this is rarely best for the student in the long run.

Domestic issues

Academic life is likely to be only one element of an individual's support needs, so a holistic approach is necessary. If a student is living away from home for the first time, a mentor may go food shopping with the student. This can be a very productive activity serving many purposes: it is a good bonding exercise for mentor and student; it can involve the experience of using public transport to get to the supermarket and it is a good opportunity for mentors to help students learn about cooking, nutrition and how to budget. All of these activities can be quite daunting for a student living independently for the first time, and unless these basic domestic challenges are faced as part of a holistic programme, it may be difficult for the student to address academic challenges.

Students sometimes need support with contacting residential staff about domestic issues such as reporting faulty kitchen equipment. They may need help when social problems arise, most frequently excessive noise from flat mates (often a particular difficulty for students with AS). Mentors may also need to involve themselves with personal issues such as hygiene: students may need to be reminded to wash clothes, bedding and even themselves on a regular basis - especially if they have been used to a high level of parental support.

Social interaction

Students with AS often have social difficulties. A mentor can be particularly useful to students who find it hard to make friends at the beginning of the year as many of the activities mentioned above would generally involve interaction with flat mates or course mates. Mentors may encourage students to join societies where they will have the opportunity to meet people with similar interests.

It is important for a mentor to have a 'thick skin' and not be offended by 'frank' comments from the student! The student/mentor relationship may be used to help students develop an insight into their social strengths and weaknesses. This may involve open discussions about what has gone well or not so well in social interactions. Specific areas of help might address the use of eye contact, turn taking in conversation or how a student's behaviour might be perceived by others. A friendly and sensitive approach is vital when discussing issues such as these.

Academic issues

Some students choose to use mentors for practical and domestic issues, others choose to involve the mentor in their academic lives. Mentors are not there to help students with the academic content of their courses, but can help them to organise themselves academically. This help might include making time planners to manage coursework deadlines.

Many universities publish course materials online, so a mentor may help students to become used to these virtual learning environments. They may provide assistance in accessing module guides and lecture notes. Coping with change is often difficult for students with AS, so mentors should encourage students to make regular use of online facilities as they are often the source of important course related information such as assignment briefs and notification of room or deadline changes. Mentors may also facilitate contact between the student and their lecturers and/or 1-1 study skills tutors. Sometimes a student will choose to have a mentor present at these meetings.

Conclusion

No two students will have the same needs and mentors should be prepared to learn from each student that they meet. This being so, the responsibility may seem daunting, but it is unlikely that any particular student will require assistance in all of the above areas and mentors will never be alone. They will always be able to consult with a member of the disability staff and/or the 1-1 study skills tutor who is working with the student. Mentors may well be paid for their work but will often feel equally rewarded by the knowledge that they have been invaluable in helping students with AS to reach their – often considerable – academic potential. And, in addition to this, there is a good chance of making some interesting and life long friends.

A Parent's View

Ann Griffin

Ann Griffin is the mother of Peter Griffin BSc (hons) MSc (res), a successful astrophysics student who happens to have Asperger's Syndrome. Here Ann provides her advice on 'Involving Parents and what they need to know'.

Disabled Student Allowance (DSA)

Make sure that the person doing the Needs Assessment for the DSA has at least an understanding of Asperger's Syndrome but preferably expertise in the subject. Ask for a laptop and printer (probably a scanner these days as well). Ask about specific software that could help, such as mind mapping software. How easily can your son/daughter take meaningful notes? Then what about a note-taker (someone who understands the subject and will therefore record relevant details)? Alternatively, could the lecture be recorded on a voice recorder? Would your son/daughter benefit from a mentor or buddy? If so this can also come from the DSA.

Communication

I found communication between the lead mentor and me to be extremely valuable. It worked because my son agreed to this email communication taking place. Try to have a meeting with the team that your son/daughter will come into contact with and include your son/daughter in the discussions. Any meetings we had always started with me introducing myself and explaining that my son wished me to be present; he would answer all questions unless he was uncertain in which case he would ask for my help. At any time, if he felt stressed, he could get up and leave the meeting. This, I felt, was very important. He never used this 'open door' but it made meetings much easier for all concerned.

Expertise

Most people will acknowledge that the parents of a person with Asperger's Syndrome/Higher Functioning Autism are the experts. Use this expertise, especially as it doesn't cost huge sums of money. Often the most simple of strategies will make a huge difference and who better to ask than the people who have lived with it for many years?

The Hertfordshire Strategy for Supporting Students with Asperger's Syndrome

Sylvia Pepper, University of Hertfordshire

The Hertfordshire experience evolved in response to need. Three things became apparent: that we were seeing an increasing number of students with AS; that they were to be found throughout the university but were clustered around the Physical Sciences and Astrophysics in particular, and that our regular disability services were not geared up to provide the sort of help needed to ensure that they had a fair chance of success. It therefore became clear that it was necessary for us to become much more flexible and to adapt our services to suit them. We decided to put a pilot AS 'support team' in place in Astrophysics. The team was made up of a Disabled Students' Co-ordinator (DSC), a Mentor, an Academic Contact in Astrophysics and a 1-1 Study Skills Support Tutor. There follows an account of how the pilot scheme has operated.

The first point of contact for an applicant with AS is likely to be a **Disabled Students' Co-ordinator**. Ideally this first contact will be made well before the student is due to start his (usually his in the case of AS, but occasionally her) course so that the foundations of the support to be given can be carefully laid. Our aim is to have an initial meeting with the student together with his parents, or other support people, months in advance of the start of the course so that we can begin to get a feel for what the support needs of this individual are likely to be. (A university's contract is generally with the student rather than with the family, but experience has taught us that, in the case of AS students, family support is often invaluable.) A second meeting is then usually arranged for a week or two before the start of the course so that the student can meet some or all of the other members of the university support team. Also, at this point, the DSC makes a formal Study Needs Agreement with the student outlining his needs and the support to be provided. With the consent of the student, this agreement is circulated to relevant staff members. The DSC continues to liaise with the other members of the team throughout the student's course. In many cases the **Mentor** is the most important support worker and is likely to spend more time with the student than any other member of the team. This is especially the case in the early days/weeks of term when any student may feel disoriented but an AS student might be overwhelmed by the degree of change he is required to adapt to: finding new rooms; turning up on time for lectures; negotiating the bustle of Freshers' Days etc. Thereafter the mentor usually remains in place as a first port of call when questions or confusions arise about any aspect of the course. The mentor is also likely to take on the role of a friend and facilitator of social integration, and as someone to help with all the practical aspects of living away from home. These might include shopping and cooking; using public transport; washing and personal hygiene etc. A mentor might spend up to four hours a week with an AS student, particularly in the early days. It is clear from the above that this is a job for a paid professional, requiring a considerable level of skill, experience and time. Funding will normally be available via the DSA.

Another vital member of the support team is the **Academic Contact** whose role is to be the link between the teaching/technical/administrative staff of the department and the rest of the AS student's support team. Every AS student is different, with individual strengths and weaknesses, but academic difficulties might arise around the clarity of instructions given; the need for prompt and constructive feedback; issues to do with group work etc. If problems arise in these areas, and if all the staff in the department know that they have a point of contact to whom they can communicate potential problems, it should be possible to deal with them quickly before they become insurmountable for the student. We have found that the academic contact is particularly valuable in reassuring staff that reasonable adjustments can be made for an AS student without increasing their workload significantly and that, with the right adjustments, AS students are capable of producing excellent work. DSA funding may also recommend a **1-1 Study Skills Support Tutor** for an AS student. AS students are often highly literate, but possible areas where 1-1 support might be valuable are in general areas like time management, assignment planning and revision and exam techniques. Work may also be done on more subject specific areas like guidance on the keeping of a good lab book. The pilot support scheme in Astrophysics at the University of Hertfordshire, as described above, has now been in operation for the past two years. We learn and amend as we go along, but we are confident that the scheme is fundamentally sound and has been helpful to the students it has supported. Key to its effectiveness has been good communication between the members of the team, most particularly, in our case, between the mentor and the academic contact. The individual AS students and their particular needs and aspirations are, of course, central to the work of the team. Essentially we are all working *with* the students and aiming at fostering the growth of independence and self esteem. Different models will work differently in different places and with different individual students; support roles may vary or overlap, but we are confident that, if used flexibly and with good liaison between the support workers involved, it can be very helpful. On this basis, we now hope to roll it out to become university-wide practice.

Asperger's Syndrome: the Sheffield Hallam Experience

Nicola Martin, Sheffield Hallam University

REAL services to assist university students who have AS

Sheffield Hallam has piloted an approach arising from a research project which scrutinised effective services for students who have Asperger's syndrome across 17 universities. (Reference NADP technical briefing 4-2008) The approach is entitled 'REAL Services to Assist University Students who have AS. REAL stands for Reliable, Empathic, Anticipatory and Logical.

Services have to be **Reliable**, i.e. not dependant on one person but involving a range of staff in various roles able to punctuate a student's week with reliable sessions of relevant backup which could include mentoring, practical help, study skills support and assistance to engage socially. Experience indicates that early backup leads to greater independence later on. Help to join in with clubs and societies in Fresher's Week assists with social inclusion and combats loneliness. Ensuring that communication between the student and relevant services is simple (e.g. via text) smoothes the way considerably.

Empathy is a two way street and enabling staff and other students to see the world through the eyes of students who have AS is really important. Students with AS are highly individual but often arrive with past experience of bullying and exclusion. Imagining feeling left out and anxious can help others to feel what this must be like and encourage them to be more inclusive and willing to embrace diversity. The student with AS is not in the wrong and should not be made to feel that they don't fit in because this will do their self esteem no good at all.

Anticipatory services are based on an understanding of conditions likely to cause anxiety, and a commitment to avoiding unnecessary stress. If a student does not like ambiguity then clear communication is going to help. Avoiding anxiety-provoking sudden routine changes is a good idea, eg via use of blackboard (or post it notes on the door) to advise of room changes.

Anticipate that a student may not know what to wear for placement and simply tell them without making a three act drama of it. Most first year students in halls will not know how the microwave works, so put a note by it explaining.

Logical services are clear straightforward and unambiguous, and not overloaded with irrelevant emotional content. Students who have AS like this, they like you to say what you mean and mean what you say; to do what you said you were going to do and to communicate with clarity.

Prior to the start of the course at Hallam we get students together with their supporters (e.g. parents) and begin the familiarisation process as well as advising them about all those DSA forms, in the presence of supporters who will listen and help from a position of understanding. Students who have AS are there at the event and this inspires confidence. We then carry out early DSA assessments and allow students to visit the campus over summer to increase familiarisation and reduce anxiety. Help is available in Fresher's week. We work with students on disclosure and ensure that this is positive and within the control of the student. In reality the student usually prefers to write a page of A4 saying, this is me, this is what I like, this is what I find challenging, this is how you can help me, this is how I can help you, and then not disseminate the information. Our approach is informed by research and by a very strong commitment to valuing diversity and to the social model of disability.

Students with AS need to know how they can be successful at university and be themselves. If they are likely to fail because they are spending 98% of their time on a piece of work worth 4% of their marks, we tell them. If they are depressed because they are socially isolated we help them to join in socially, e.g. by identifying a regular activity. We are sensitive to those who do not identify as being disabled and ensure that services such as study skills sessions, and social activities such as groups run by the multi faith chaplain are widely publicised. We are very clear that our relationship is with the student primarily and make this clear to parents, whilst acknowledging that often parental support is vital. Everything we do is based on the understanding that if you have met one person with AS, you have only met one person with AS. We do not burden our students with stereotypes because we see this as a form of oppression. This is a view which has been articulated by people who have AS and we listen to what our students tell us.

Asperger's Syndrome: the Bournemouth Experience

Ruthi Chesney, University of Bournemouth

Case Studies

- About 7 years ago, when a student with Asperger's Syndrome came to study at Bournemouth University, arrangements were made to employ an experienced support worker who had previously worked with the Wessex Autistic Society. Together with a dyslexia tutor, the support worker worked exclusively and intensively with the student. Thanks to those intensive efforts, he graduated with a good degree².
- The following year BU welcomed a mature AS student on to a computing course. Despite our best efforts to support him, this student dropped out of the course, having told us on a number of occasions that "no-one seemed to understand" what he needed, and therefore he simply couldn't access the course. He was an extremely able man academically. At that time, we had not yet worked out what academic support would enable such students to progress: it seemed that *specialist* support was the only answer – but how could this be appropriate, in the absence of specific learning difficulties?
- A school leaver with AS was due to attend the next year's BU Summer School in June. We invited him along beforehand to see an adviser, accompanied by his parents (standard practice for our prospective students with potentially 'complex' needs). During our assessment, this young man told the adviser that his needs, in terms of accessing his course, were "purely social". He was an extremely able student and was predicted very high grades. Schoolwork, exams and coursework, had never been a problem, and the notion that he might need "academic support" was mildly offensive to him. He wanted help in making friends; he recognised his "difference" and that other people found him "strange". His parents were particularly anxious about how their son would cope at university.

Having promised to come up with appropriate strategies, both for the summer school and his eventual enrolment onto the university course, our adviser subsequently contacted the **Summer School mentor** who would be responsible for the group including this student, and carefully briefed him, both in general terms about Asperger's Syndrome, and specifically about our prospective student. **Mentor** and student had a look at the Summer School programme which detailed events and opportunities to develop social contacts. The **Summer School mentor** put a plan of action in place, which included his discreetly 'befriending' the student and involving him in ways which made him feel naturally a part of the group. The student went on to have a very satisfying and happy experience of summer school and after enrolment, he came into the service to say how much he'd enjoyed getting to know the **mentor**. He now felt he had a circle of friends across the university community.

Two years later, he has never felt the need to approach the service for support. He will be undertaking an industrial placement during the coming year, and we fully expect him to return the following year to complete his course and gain the First Class Degree he expects.

- I first met our fourth case student when he came to BU to undertake a 'top up' BA degree in Music Design. I have rarely met such a complex, intelligent – and frightened - individual. Having assessed his needs for the final year of his course – and set in train his DSA arrangements, internal recommendations for support and so on, as we do in every case – I agreed to his, somewhat unusual, request for a weekly 'session' with me.

It was a rare opportunity for me to learn about Asperger's Syndrome from a gifted man who received his diagnosis only at the age of 38. He also has dyslexia, dyspraxia and, less frequently now, bouts of anxiety, depression and he is also enormously creative. He is also a person of great personal strength. Now he has grown in stature and his confidence has grown gradually, over the 3 years that we have supported him. At some point during his postgraduate studies, I realised that he was now my 'teacher' and that he possessed innate qualities and skills that would make him the perfect Educational Access Mentor for other people who might share his experience. He has made the difference to the support offered to students with Asperger's Syndrome at BU.

He now has a "portfolio" of half a dozen students with AS and is delivering time and task management support in his own, unique way – with the insight of an AS student. Where others found it difficult to 'get the message across' to resistant AS students, he has the advantage of being able to say "I absolutely understand..." and "If I could do it, so can you...". His approach may take a little longer but there is no doubt about his outcomes: AS students are making it through their courses, equipped with skills for life.

² For details see <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=171274>

Below is his scheme for helping 'Student X'.

Planning the Project Management Assignment

We attempted to plan the project management assignment by taking the question and breaking it down into small parts, giving student X lots of small achievable targets to focus on. We then discussed time allocation to each area of the assignment and how the presentation might be structured. Student X said that this 'helped a bit', but was not at all optimistic about getting it done within the time specified. The idea at this stage is to try it and see if it works.

The Benefits of Time Management

We discussed the problems that student B has with stress and anxiety. For student X, assignments continue infinitely up until the deadline and the stress of the assignment is never on his mind. Effective management of time could be the way for him to overcome these problems. If he can take control of the time and effort involved in completing assignments, then he could perhaps make time for the things that he is interested in.

Part of student X's problem is that he doesn't know how to relax. He says that he has nothing that he really likes doing and finds it very difficult to switch off.

Obstacles to Time Management

The student's obstacles to time management are as follows:

- Even though the assignment can be planned, it is never 'off his mind' until the deadline has passed.
- He has tried this approach before and it never works.
- Planning the work hour by hour doesn't work at home.
- It always takes him longer than expected (usually at least twice as long)

Student X now consistently attends one mentoring session a week – no longer needing the intensive support of 2 years ago – and is independently accessing his course of study – successfully!

A Quick Guide for Supporting Students with Asperger's Syndrome: the AS Academic Contact

What is Asperger's Syndrome?

- ❖ Asperger's Syndrome (AS) is a condition on the autistic spectrum characterised by difficulties with **flexibility of thought**, **social interaction** and **communication**.
- ❖ People with AS are usually of average or above average intelligence with good verbal skills and are often capable of leading full and independent lives.
- ❖ People with AS may become very focused on an activity that they enjoy. This can lead to significant productivity if the activity is related to their work.
- ❖ People with AS may find it difficult to empathise or to know what others are thinking, finding other people unpredictable and confusing. They are likely to experience difficulties functioning in 'our world', which relies heavily on non-verbal communication and the unwritten rules which guide our behaviour.
- ❖ Life can be hard for people with AS; it affects every aspect of their lives. Anxiety and depression are common experiences.
- ❖ Finally, it is important to remember that **every person with AS is a unique individual** with their own strengths and weaknesses. This card provides useful insight into some of the issues that you may face, but **be prepared to learn more** each and every time you meet someone with AS.

What it might mean for you:

- ❖ **Have you been informed of issues concerning a student with Asperger's Syndrome?** As the Asperger's Syndrome Academic Contact for your School/Department, you might be informed of problems concerning the AS student by staff, the student's mentor or the student.
- ❖ **Do you know who to contact in your School/Department or the disability unit?** You'll need to make sure the appropriate people are informed of any issues as early as possible, and check that appropriate action is being taken. Knowing who to contact and when will reduce your workload.
- ❖ **Are the AS students behaving 'differently' from other students?** Certain social skills may not be intuitive to some people with AS. Staff need to learn about the issues faced by students with Asperger's Syndrome.

What you can do to support students with AS in your School/Department:

- ❖ Your role is to provide an **important link** between your School/Department, the student, the student's mentor (if applicable) and your disability unit. See 'Asperger's Syndrome: the Hertfordshire Experience' in the accompanying guide for more details about your role.
- ❖ Make sure lecturing/admin/technical staff know **of your role** and how they can contact you. Let them know they need only send a short email to inform you of any issues. Encourage them to contact you as early as possible when a problem arises.
- ❖ Perhaps the best advice is: **Communicate effectively and early!** If the right people are informed of potential problems early enough then steps can be put into place before a small problem becomes insurmountable for the student.
- ❖ Make sure your AS student is **aware of all coursework/exam deadlines**. It may be that the student mentor takes on this role – but ask lecturing staff to contact you if deadlines are missed.
- ❖ There are some periods in the academic calendar that may pose particular problems (e.g. assignment deadlines, exams or allocation of project topics.). Although not every eventuality can be predicted, some **planning for known stress-points in the academic calendar is useful** and may reduce staff workload in the longer term. For example, would additional study skills/exam skills training be beneficial as the exams approach? Would your AS students benefit from additional guidance when project topics are allocated?
- ❖ Every student with Asperger's Syndrome is different. You may have one student who constantly asks for help, whilst another may not admit any difficulties. Therefore be prepared to **adapt your support strategy** to each student.
- ❖ Try to maintain a **thick skin** as a defence against the directness of some AS students. At the same time you may need to suppress your own social etiquette and be direct with them. People with AS do not necessarily learn manners indirectly and would generally prefer to be told (in private) if they are coming over as ill mannered or odd.

For more information about supporting students with Asperger's Syndrome see the booklet and DVD that accompany these Quick Guides!

The Quick Guide for each member of staff has a box like this for your contact details – make sure other members of staff know your role and how to contact you!

Your AS Academic Contact is:

Email:

Tel:

A Quick Guide for Supporting Students with Asperger's Syndrome: Administrative Staff

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- ❖ People with AS may become very focused on an activity that they enjoy. This can lead to significant productivity if the activity is related to their work.
- ❖ People with AS may find it difficult to empathise or to know what others are thinking, finding other people unpredictable and confusing. They are likely to experience difficulties functioning in 'our world', which relies heavily on non-verbal communication and the unwritten rules which guide our behaviour.
- ❖ Life can be hard for people with AS; it affects every aspect of their lives. Anxiety and depression are common experiences.
- ❖ Finally, it is important to remember that **every person with AS is a unique individual** with their own strengths and weaknesses. This card provides useful insight into some of the issues that you may face, but **be prepared to learn more** each and every time you meet someone with AS.

What it might mean for you:

- ❖ **Have AS students struggled with handing in coursework, or other administrative issues?** AS students may struggle in the university environment without adequate support. They may find it hard to cope with change and unexpected events.
- ❖ **Has an AS student misunderstood your instructions?** Sometimes AS students may misinterpret what you have said.
- ❖ **Have students with AS seemed abrupt or even rude?** Certain social skills may not be intuitive to some people with AS.
- ❖ **Does an AS student seem distracted?** Some people with AS are hypersensitive to sensory stimuli. E.g., a flickering strip light may be so distracting that a student cannot concentrate.

What you can do to support students with AS in your School/Department:

- ❖ If your School/Department has one, then **contact the AS Academic Contact or mentor as soon as you observe an issue arising** concerning a student with AS. A short email sent early to the right person can dramatically improve the chances of the issue being resolved before it is too late, and is likely to reduce your workload in the long term.
- ❖ Try to give **clear and early notification of any administrative changes that might affect an AS student**. e.g. hand-in dates, changes to registration procedures, etc. If your department has an *AS Academic Contact*, then send that person a short email to inform them of the change.
- ❖ Wherever possible give clear, **step by step instructions**. If you find an AS student has misinterpreted your instructions then try to be patient and if possible repeat the same instruction in a different way. AS students often have low self esteem – offer as much realistic encouragement as possible.
- ❖ Be **reliable, consistent** and offer help at a level that you can maintain
- ❖ Try, where possible, to be **flexible** and adapt to their style of thinking and working, and to their patterns of behaviour.
- ❖ Try to maintain a **thick skin** as a defence against the directness of people with AS. You may also need to suppress your own social etiquette and be direct with them. People with AS do not learn manners indirectly and would generally prefer to be told (in private) if they are coming over as ill mannered or odd.
- ❖ It is important to **avoid stereotyping** AS students. They will be very different from each other.

For more information about supporting students with Asperger's Syndrome see the booklet and DVD that accompany these Quick Guides!

Your AS Academic Contact is:

Email:

Tel:

A Quick Guide for Supporting Students with Asperger's Syndrome: the Head of School/Department

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What it might mean for you:

- ❖ **Do you have students who, despite seeming capable, are underperforming in your School/Department?** Intellectually able AS students, who have the potential to do well in your subject, may struggle to adjust to the university environment without adequate support.
- ❖ **Have lecturers or other staff alerted you to unusual behaviour by a particular student?** Certain social skills may not be intuitive to some people with AS and they may need to be learned. Equally, staff may need to learn about Asperger's Syndrome.
- ❖ **Do some staff see supporting AS students as hard work or are they feeling overwhelmed?** If supporting students with AS is left entirely to one person, or if there is no agreed protocol for communicating problems then staff may feel overwhelmed.

What you can do to support AS students in your tutorials:

- ❖ **Hand out these cards!** Make sure the right members of staff supporting and interacting with students with AS have their own version of the relevant Quick Guide.
- ❖ If your school/department does not already have one, **consider making one of your staff members an Asperger's Syndrome Academic Contact (AC)**. This role is described in the accompanying booklet. This member of staff acts as a first point of contact when problems occur for the AS student. They provide an important link between your School/Department and the disability support unit in your university. Lecturers can alert the AC to any potential problems (for example missed coursework). The AC will then take responsibility for making sure the right people are contacted (e.g. your disability unit may have appointed a mentor for the student) and that appropriate action is taken.
- ❖ Every student with Asperger's Syndrome is different. You may have one student who constantly asks for help, whilst another may not admit any difficulties until too late. Therefore be prepared to **adapt your support strategy** to each student.
- ❖ There are some periods in the academic calendar that may pose particular problems (e.g. assignment deadlines, exams or allocation of project topics.). Although not every eventuality can be predicted, some **planning for known stress-points in the academic calendar is useful** and may reduce staff workload in the longer term. For example, would additional study skills/exam skills training be beneficial as the exams approach? Would your AS students benefit from additional guidance when project topics are allocated?
- ❖ Perhaps the best advice is: **communicate effectively and early!** If the right people are informed of potential problems early enough then steps can be put into place before a small problem becomes insurmountable for the student. **If your school/department has the right people communicating effectively then problems can be sorted quickly, with a minimal workload, and the student will be more able to succeed in reaching his/her potential.**

For more information about supporting students with Asperger's Syndrome see the booklet and DVD that accompany these Quick Guides!

Your AS Academic Contact is:

Email:

Tel:

A Quick Guide for Supporting Students with Asperger's Syndrome: Laboratory Demonstrators

What is Asperger's Syndrome?

- ❖ Asperger's Syndrome (AS) is a condition on the autistic spectrum characterised by difficulties with **flexibility of thought**, **social interaction** and **communication**.
- ❖ People with AS are usually of average or above average intelligence with good verbal skills and are often capable of leading full and independent lives.
- ❖ People with AS may become very focused on an activity that they enjoy. This can lead to significant productivity if the activity is related to their work.
- ❖ People with AS may find it difficult to empathise or to know what others are thinking, finding other people unpredictable and confusing. They are likely to experience difficulties functioning in 'our world', which relies heavily on non-verbal communication and the unwritten rules which guide our behaviour.
- ❖ Life can be hard for people with AS; it affects every aspect of their lives. Anxiety and depression are common experiences.
- ❖ Finally, it is important to remember that **every person with AS is a unique individual** with their own strengths and weaknesses. This card provides useful insight into some of the issues that you may face, but **be prepared to learn more** each and every time you meet someone with AS.

What it might mean for you:

- ❖ **Are the AS students finding laboratory work much more difficult than lectures?** You may find AS students struggling with the open-ended aspects of experiments.
- ❖ **Are the AS students' laboratory books lacking detail?** AS students may record very little in their laboratory books, or seem unable to determine what information is relevant to record.
- ❖ **Has equipment/rooms been changed?** People with AS can find it hard to cope with change and unexpected events.
- ❖ **Have they understood you?** AS students may misinterpret your instructions or questions.
- ❖ **Do the AS students seem rude or abrupt?** You may notice that your AS students behave 'differently'. They may have difficulties within conversations.

What you can do to support AS students in the lab:

- ❖ A laboratory session can seem much more 'messy' than a lecture; it presents more unknowns and uncertainty than a text book. For some AS students it can be a real struggle. However, this open-ended nature of the lab is part of research, and the aim is *not* to shield AS students from research-like activity, but to recognise that they might require more **help and support** on their road to becoming independent researchers.
- ❖ **Keeping a lab book** can be a real challenge for an AS student. They often do not know what is relevant to record. Things which are obvious to non-AS students may not be so obvious to a student with AS. It is useful therefore to keep an eye on their progress and make helpful suggestions from time to time, e.g. "This would be a good place to add a labelled diagram", etc.
- ❖ **Feedback is important** for every student, but even more so for AS students. It is important to provide detailed comments in laboratory books that show how marks could be improved, e.g. "If you had included a labelled diagram here, you would have gained 5 more marks", etc. **Written feedback** is particularly useful.
- ❖ **Every student with Asperger's Syndrome is different.** You may have one student who constantly asks for help, whilst another may not admit any difficulties until too late. Therefore be prepared to adapt your support strategy to each student.
- ❖ Perhaps the best advice is: **communicate effectively and early!** If you spot a potential problem developing, inform the appropriate member of staff (e.g. the 'AS Academic Point of Contact' if you have one)
- ❖ Try to maintain a **thick skin** as a defence against the directness of some students with AS. At the same time you may need to suppress your own social etiquette and be direct with them. People with AS do not learn manners indirectly and would generally prefer to be told (in private) if they are coming over as ill mannered or odd.

For more information about supporting students with Asperger's Syndrome see the booklet and DVD that accompany these Quick Guides!

Your AS Academic Contact is:

Email:

Tel:

A Quick Guide for Supporting Students with Asperger's Syndrome: Laboratory & Observatory Technicians

What is Asperger's Syndrome?

- ❖ Asperger's Syndrome (AS) is a condition on the autistic spectrum characterised by difficulties with **flexibility of thought**, **social interaction** and **communication**.
- ❖ People with AS are usually of average or above average intelligence with good verbal skills and are often capable of leading full and independent lives.
- ❖ People with AS may become very focused on an activity that they enjoy. This can lead to significant productivity if the activity is related to their work.
- ❖ People with AS may find it difficult to empathise or to know what others are thinking, finding other people unpredictable and confusing. They are likely to experience difficulties functioning in 'our world', which relies heavily on non-verbal communication and the unwritten rules which guide our behaviour.
- ❖ Life can be hard for people with AS; it affects every aspect of their lives. Anxiety and depression are common experiences.
- ❖ Finally, it is important to remember that **every person with AS is a unique individual** with their own strengths and weaknesses. This card provides useful insight into some of the issues that you may face, but **be prepared to learn more** each and every time you meet someone with AS.

What it might mean for you:

- ❖ **Have you made last-minute changes to equipment or the organisation of the lab?** People with AS can find it hard to cope with change and unexpected events.
- ❖ **Have your Health & Safety instructions been fully understood?** AS students may find 'simple' instructions difficult to understand.
- ❖ **Are AS students appearing to behave 'differently' from other students?** Certain social skills may not be intuitive to some people with AS and you may interpret their behaviour as abrupt or rude.
- ❖ **Do AS students seem distracted in your lab? Some people with AS are hypersensitive to sensory stimuli.** E.g. a flickering strip light may be so distracting that the student cannot concentrate in a lab session.

What you can do to support AS students in your lab/observatory:

- ❖ Check with the appropriate staff member to see if there are any AS students in your laboratory/observatory sessions.
- ❖ If your School/Department has one, **contact the AS Academic Contact or mentor as soon as you observe an issue arising** concerning an AS student. A short email sent early to the right person can dramatically improve the chances of the issue being resolved before it is too late, and is likely to reduce your workload in the long term.
- ❖ Try to give clear and early notification of any **changes**. E.g. movement of equipment or room changes. If for example, equipment has been moved it may benefit the student to be told exactly where it will be before they arrive at the laboratory session.
- ❖ Wherever possible **give clear, step by step instructions**. It is a good idea to check that each Asperger's Syndrome student fully understands your Health & Safety instructions for the laboratory. Talk to the student, or ask the appropriate member of staff to confirm their understanding.
- ❖ Try to maintain a **thick skin** as a defence against the possible directness of the students. At the same time you may need to suppress your own social etiquette and be direct with them. People with AS do not learn manners indirectly and would generally prefer to be told (in private) if they are coming over as ill mannered or odd.
- ❖ It is important to avoid **stereotyping** AS students. They will be very different from each other.

For more information about supporting students with Asperger's Syndrome see the booklet and DVD that accompany these Quick Guides!

Your AS Academic Contact is:

Email:

Tel:

A Quick Guide for Supporting Students with Asperger's Syndrome: Lecturers

What is Asperger's Syndrome?

- ❖ Asperger's Syndrome (AS) is a condition on the autistic spectrum characterised by difficulties with **flexibility of thought**, **social interaction** and **communication**.
- ❖ People with AS are usually of average or above average intelligence with good verbal skills and are often capable of leading full and independent lives.
- ❖ People with AS may become very focused on an activity that they enjoy. This can lead to significant productivity if the activity is related to their work.
- ❖ People with AS may find it difficult to empathise or to know what others are thinking, finding other people unpredictable and confusing. They are likely to experience difficulties functioning in 'our world', which relies heavily on non-verbal communication and the unwritten rules which guide our behaviour.
- ❖ Life can be hard for people with AS; it affects every aspect of their lives. Anxiety and depression are common experiences.
- ❖ Finally, it is important to remember that **every person with AS is a unique individual** with their own strengths and weaknesses. This card provides useful insight into some of the issues that you may face, but **be prepared to learn more** each and every time you meet someone with AS.

What it might mean for you:

- ❖ **Has an AS student missed your lecture after it was rescheduled?** People with AS can find it hard to cope with change and unexpected events.
- ❖ **Has an AS student's answer to your assignment been off-topic?** AS students may sometimes misinterpret your instructions or questions.
- ❖ **Are AS students finding group-work difficult?** You may notice that your AS students behave 'differently'. They may come across as abrupt or even rude and have difficulties with conversations.
- ❖ **Does an AS student appear distracted in your lecture?** Some people with AS are hypersensitive to sensory stimuli. For example, a flickering strip light may be so distracting that the student cannot concentrate.

What you can do to support AS students in your lectures:

- ❖ If your School/Department has one, then **contact the AS Academic Contact or mentor as soon as you observe an issue arising** concerning an AS student. Problems in lectures? Absenteeism? Assignment or exam issues? A short email sent early to the right person can dramatically improve the chances of the issue being resolved before it is too late, and is likely to reduce your workload in the long term.
- ❖ Try to give **clear and early notification of any changes** to your lectures or assignments. e.g. hand-in dates, room changes, etc. If your department has an *AS Academic Contact*, then send that person a short email to inform them of the change.
- ❖ Wherever possible give clear, **step by step instructions** and prompt and constructive **feedback**. If you find an AS student has misinterpreted one of your assignments inform your department's *AS contact* (if you have one), or the AS student's personal tutor. AS students often have low self esteem – offer as much realistic encouragement as possible. Be aware that the AS student may opt to not start your assignment due to the '**blank page**' problem.
- ❖ Be **reliable, consistent** and offer help at a level that you can maintain
- ❖ Try, where possible, to be **flexible** and adapt to their style of thinking and working, and to their patterns of behaviour.
- ❖ Try to maintain a **thick skin** as a defence against the directness of people with AS. You may also need to suppress your own social etiquette and be direct with them. People with AS do not learn manners indirectly and would generally prefer to be told (in private) if they are coming over as ill mannered or odd.
- ❖ Group work – **facilitate**, if necessary, a group in which an AS student is involved.
- ❖ It is important to **avoid stereotyping** AS students. They will be very different from each other.

For more information about supporting students with Asperger's Syndrome see the booklet and DVD that accompany these Quick Guides!

Your AS Academic Contact is:

Email:

Tel:

A Quick Guide for Supporting Students with Asperger's Syndrome: Personal Tutors

What is Asperger's Syndrome?

- ❖ Asperger's Syndrome (AS) is a condition on the autistic spectrum characterised by difficulties with **flexibility of thought**, **social interaction** and **communication**.
- ❖ People with AS are usually of average or above average intelligence with good verbal skills and are often capable of leading full and independent lives.
- ❖ People with AS may become very focused on an activity that they enjoy. This can lead to significant productivity if the activity is related to their work.
- ❖ People with AS may find it difficult to empathise or to know what others are thinking, finding other people unpredictable and confusing. They are likely to experience difficulties functioning in 'our world', which relies heavily on non-verbal communication and the unwritten rules which guide our behaviour.
- ❖ Life can be hard for people with AS; it affects every aspect of their lives. Anxiety and depression are common experiences.
- ❖ Finally, it is important to remember that **every person with AS is a unique individual** with their own strengths and weaknesses. This card provides useful insight into some of the issues that you may face, but **be prepared to learn more** each and every time you meet someone with AS.

What it might mean for you:

- ❖ **Has an AS student missed your tutorial after it was rescheduled?** People with AS can find it hard to cope with change and unexpected events.
- ❖ **Has an AS student's answer to your assignment been off-topic?** AS students may misinterpret your questions or instructions.
- ❖ **Are AS students finding working in your tutorial group difficult?** You may notice that your AS students behave 'differently'. They may come across as abrupt or even rude and have difficulties with conversations.
- ❖ **Does an AS student appear distracted in your tutorial?** Some people with AS are hypersensitive to sensory stimuli. For example, a flickering strip light may be so distracting that the student cannot concentrate.

What you can do to support AS students in your tutorials:

- ❖ If your School/Department has one, **contact the AS Academic Contact or mentor as soon as you observe an issue arising** concerning an AS student.. Problems in tutorials? Absenteeism? Assignment or exam issues? A short email sent early to the right person can dramatically improve the chances of the issue being resolved before it is too late, and is likely to reduce your workload in the long term.
- ❖ If you provide **pastoral support** for the student, make sure lecturing/admin/technical staff know of your role and how they can contact you. Let them know they need only send a short email to inform you of any issues. Encourage them to contact you as early as possible when a problem arises.
- ❖ Try to give **clear and early notification of any changes** to your tutorials or assignments. e.g. hand-in dates, room changes, etc. If your department has an *AS Academic Contact*, then send that person a short email to inform them of the change.
- ❖ Wherever possible give clear, **step by step instructions** and prompt and constructive **feedback**. If you find an AS student has misinterpreted one of your assignments inform your department's *AS contact* (if you have one). AS students often have low self esteem – offer as much realistic encouragement as possible.
- ❖ Be **reliable, consistent** and offer help at a level that you can maintain
- ❖ Try, where possible, to be **flexible** and adapt to their style of thinking and working, and to their patterns of behaviour.
- ❖ Try to maintain a **thick skin** as a defence against the directness of people with AS. You may also need to suppress your own social etiquette and be direct with them. People with AS do not learn manners indirectly and would generally prefer to be told (in private) if they are coming over as ill mannered or odd.
- ❖ Group work – **facilitate**, if necessary, a group in which an AS student is involved.
- ❖ It is important to **avoid stereotyping** AS students. They will be very different from each other.

For more information about supporting students with Asperger's Syndrome see the booklet and DVD that accompany these Quick Guides!

Your AS Academic Contact is:

Email:

Tel:

A Quick Guide for Supporting Students with Asperger's Syndrome: the Programme/Scheme Tutor

What is Asperger's Syndrome?

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- ❖ People with AS are usually of average or above average intelligence with good verbal skills and are often capable of leading full and independent lives.
- ❖ People with AS may become very focused on an activity that they enjoy. This can lead to significant productivity if the activity is related to their work.
- ❖ People with AS may find it difficult to empathise or to know what others are thinking, finding other people unpredictable and confusing. They are likely to experience difficulties functioning in 'our world', which relies heavily on non-verbal communication and the unwritten rules which guide our behaviour.
- ❖ Life can be hard for people with AS; it affects every aspect of their lives. Anxiety and depression are common experiences.
- ❖ Finally, it is important to remember that **every person with AS is a unique individual** with their own strengths and weaknesses. This card provides useful insight into some of the issues that you may face, but **be prepared to learn more** each and every time you meet someone with AS.

What it might mean for you:

- ❖ **Do you have AS students who, despite seeming capable, are underperforming in your School/Department?** Intellectually able AS students, who have the potential to do well in your subject, may struggle to adjust to the university environment without adequate support.
- ❖ **Have lecturers or other staff alerted you to unusual behaviour by a particular student?** Certain social skills may not be intuitive to some people with AS and they may need to be learned by students in your School/Department. Equally, staff need learn about Asperger's Syndrome.
- ❖ **Do some staff see supporting AS students as hard work or are they feeling overwhelmed?** If supporting students with AS is left entirely to one person, or if there is no agreed protocol for communicating problems then staff may quickly feel overwhelmed.

What you can do to support AS students on your programme/scheme:

- ❖ Encourage your School/Department to **consider making one of the staff members an Academic Contact (AC)**. This member of staff acts as a first point of contact for when problems occur for the AS student. They provide an important link between your school/department and the disability support in your university. Staff can alert the academic point of contact to any potential problems (for example missed coursework), who will then take responsibility for making sure the right people are contacted (e.g. your disability unit may have appointed a mentor for the student) and that appropriate action is taken.
- ❖ Make sure lecturing/admin/technical staff know how they can **contact the Academic Contact**. Let them know they need only send a short email/quick phone call to inform the contact of any issues.
- ❖ Make sure your AS students are aware of all **coursework/exam deadlines**. It may be that the student mentor takes on this role – but ask lecturing staff to inform the AS Academic Contact if deadlines are missed.
- ❖ There are some periods in the academic calendar that may pose particular problems (e.g. assignment deadlines, exams or allocation of project topics.). Although not every eventuality can be predicted, some **planning for known stress-points in the academic calendar is useful** and may reduce staff workload in the longer term. E.g., would additional study skills/exam skills training be beneficial as the exams approach? Would your AS students benefit from additional guidance when project topics are allocated?
- ❖ Perhaps the best advice is: **communicate effectively and early!** If the right people are informed of potential problems early enough then steps can be put into place before a small problem becomes insurmountable for the student.
- ❖ Try to maintain a **thick skin** as a defence against AS directness. At the same time you may need to suppress your own social etiquette and be direct with them. People with AS do not learn manners indirectly and would generally prefer to be told (in private) if they are coming over as ill mannered or odd.
- ❖ **Every student with Asperger's Syndrome is different**. You may have one student who constantly asks for help, whilst another may not admit any difficulties until too late. Therefore be prepared to **adapt your support strategy** to each student.

For more information about supporting students with Asperger's Syndrome see the booklet and DVD that accompany these Quick Guides!

Your AS Academic Contact is:

Email:

Tel:

The Higher Education Academy UK Physical Sciences Centre

...enhancing the student experience in chemistry, physics, astronomy and forensic science within the university sector.

Physical Sciences Practice Guides are designed to provide practical advice and guidance on issues and topics related to teaching and learning in the physical sciences. Each guide focuses on a particular aspect of higher education and is written by an academic experienced in that field.

This guide is the result of the desire to improve the situation of students with Asperger's Syndrome (AS), and the staff supporting them. Its aim is to provide the academic who has little or no experience of AS, with a helping hand. It is also meant to be a first step in a process of encouraging our academic community to engage with this important issue. Indeed, we hope that in the process of using this resource pack, some readers will be encouraged to provide their own insights for a future edition.

The guide is edited by 2 physical science academics; Mark Hughes and Alan McCall and 2 disability professionals; Victoria Milne and Sylvia Pepper



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