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# Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)

## Information about ASDs

Autism is a lifelong developmental disorder that affects the way an individual communicates and relates to people around them. It is characterised by inflexible thinking, rigid behavioural patterns, and a lack of social and communication skills. Individuals with ASDs can find unexpected changes extremely stressful due to their strong adherence to rituals and routines. They might exhibit unusual body language, facial expressions, and feel uncomfortable making eye contact.

Understanding and awareness of social/conversational rules can be poor, and individuals with ASD often experience difficulties with social interactions and relationships. The degree and nature of the characteristics can vary significantly between individuals.

The term Asperger's Syndrome is used to refer to the type of autism which has implications for social communication but not does affect intelligence or language development. Its use was superseded in 2013 in professional diagnostic circles in favour of Autistic Spectrum Disorder.

ASDs have a high degree of co-occurrence with other disabilities and health issues. Individuals might also experience mental health conditions, specific learning difficulties, or heightened sensory sensitivity.

## Implications for study

Students at Oxford have often developed very good coping strategies but transition to University is likely to pose particular challenges as a result of their ASD. They might struggle to make friends, relate to others, or know how to express and handle emotions. They might also find it hard to communicate ideas effectively or know when/how best to assert their opinion or ask questions during classes, leading them to interrupt frequently, talk over others inappropriately, or not speak at all. This can lead to social isolation and difficulty in lectures and tutorials.

Students with ASDs might also find it hard to cope with the day-to-day domestic tasks and activities associated with independent living, such as eating at regular mealtimes, getting to bed at a reasonable time, doing washing or laundry, getting to and from academic/medical/personal appointments on time, and managing 'free time'. This might be especially so if they have come straight from home and school where they have previously been used to a high level of support, and academic work could become jeopardised by a decline in personal or emotional functioning.

## Guidance for working with students with ASD

The following notes highlight factors to take into consideration when working with students with ASD and suggest practical action and informal adjustments which might be made.

## Communication

- Consider taking an appropriate opportunity to talk to the student about their disability. Ask them discretely about the impact of their disability and discuss with them what might be helpful (never ask or expect a student to discuss personal or medical details with you).
- Students with ASD can have a very literal interpretation of language so instructions should be clear, concise and unambiguous; avoid sarcasm and irony, and don't assume that students with ASD will pick up on facial or behavioural communication cues; say what you mean and clearly state what you expect of them (both in terms of academic work and behaviour).
- Be aware of the risks of social isolation and potential vulnerability to mental health problems - students with ASDs won't always be forthcoming about any difficulties they are experiencing and might tell you that "everything is fine" when that is really far from the case; in discussion with the student consider if more regular contact than might normally be expected is needed.

## Environment

- Assess your teaching room for adequate lighting/heating and limit background noise (open windows, noisy extractor fans and heating/cooling units) - individuals with ASDs may be extremely sensitive to light, noise, touch, smells, and crowds, and concentration can be significantly affected by these.
- Reserve seating (if helpful) ...near to exits (at the front/rear or sides/aisles) so the student is able to leave discretely if they needed.

## Study

- Use clear frameworks for written work with precise instructions; be prepared to give extra clarification or more structured feedback than you normally might; provide instructions and feedback both verbally and in writing (typed/electronic format), and send a written summary after meetings/discussions with clear action points.
- Students with ASDs might face difficulties with structuring thoughts and ideas, and expressing them effectively (verbally or in writing) - understanding and awareness of this is key, particularly around deadlines, examinations and other stress or transition points in the academic calendar when their mental health and general functioning might become particularly vulnerable.
- In group activities you may need to consider facilitating discussions more closely than you normally would, possibly intervening sensitively when required so the student feels more confident to participate in an appropriate way; reduced group size or 1:1 tutorials might be considered in some cases.
- Consider if provision of a more targeted/graded reading list that points to specific resources to ensure the student focuses on the correct information - this can help if individuals are having trouble knowing what to focus on or moving from task to task.

## Planning / Organisation

- Give key course information, deadlines and timetables well in advance.

- Keep timetables as consistent as possible to help provide structure, and give advance notice of any changes (times, venues) so that students have time to adapt to new plans - students with ASDs work well with routine and unexpected change can cause significant anxiety.
- Additional consideration when planning field work and years abroad to anticipate potential stressors/barriers to participation and identify support in a timely way.

## Examples of reasonable adjustments

The Student Support Plan (SSP) sets out the formal reasonable adjustments recommended by the Disability Advisory Service, and will provide additional specific individual information where needed. However, the following list gives some examples of possible reasonable adjustments.

**Please note these adjustments will not be applicable to every student nor is this list exhaustive.**

- Provision of a practical support assistant for short-term support to help and assist with transitional periods, and reduce anxiety and social isolation.
- Provision of a specialist mentor to help students develop social skills and strategies for managing the impact of their ASD, dealing with stress, and maintaining realistic study patterns and a healthy routine.
- Permission to record lectures or take notes on a computer and access to lecture capture.
- Privileged reader status at college / University libraries including extended loans.
- Provision of examination adjustments such as extra time, a separate or familiar room with opportunity to familiarise in advance, use of a computer (if fine motor co-ordination is poor).
- Provision of onsite accommodation and the option to be able to keep the same room throughout the course (and vacations); allocation of a room in a quiet location, away from communal facilities or thoroughfares due to heightened sensory sensitivity.

## Additional resources

- For further advice and information staff may contact the Disability Advisory Service by email on [disability@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:disability@admin.ox.ac.uk) or telephone **01865 (2)80459**, or see our [student](#) and [staff](#) web pages.
- [‘Autism, Asperger’s and Oxford’ information video](#): A Disability Advisory Service presentation recorded using “lecture capture” technology.
- [Asperger’s Video Series – Mentors](#): A video featuring some mentors at the Disability Advisory Service
- [National Autistic Society](#) provides more information about ASDs and support.