



**Disability Resource Centre (DRC) Briefing Paper,
in consultation with the
Autism Research Centre (ARC, Dept of Psychiatry).**

Supporting Students with Asperger Syndrome (AS)

Contents:

10 Key features of Asperger Syndrome (AS)	2
What is Asperger Syndrome	3
Supporting Students with Asperger Syndrome	
• Guidance for interviewing applicants	4
• Support Available at the University of Cambridge	
• Disabled Students Allowance	5
• Health and Safety and Discipline Issues	6
Supporting Students: Strategies Table	
• Academic	7
• College Life	11
Useful websites and books	13

❖ **10 Key Features of Asperger Syndrome (AS)**

People with Asperger Syndrome will have some of the following characteristics:-

- find social situations confusing
- find it hard to make small talk
- be good at picking up details and facts
- find it hard to work out what other people are feeling
- can focus on certain things for long periods
- can appear rude
- have unusually strong narrow interests
- does things in inflexible repetitive way
- have difficulty making friends
- tend to turn conversations back on themselves or to own topic of interest

The above list is taken from the CLASS leaflet. CLASS is the Cambridge Lifespan Asperger Syndrome Service, funded charitably, which offers a diagnostic assessment for adults with suspected AS. Contact clinic secretary (Paula Naimi) on 01223 746057.

Note the above 10 features are not comprehensive but provide a quick checklist. Most people with AS will endorse 9 or 10 out of 10.

What is Asperger Syndrome?

Asperger syndrome is an autism spectrum disorder, first described by Hans Asperger in 1944. The condition has become increasingly recognised in the last 20 years and is thought to affect 1 in 250 of the population, with a ratio of 6 males to 1 female (Managing AS at College and University Jamieson 2004. CLASS estimate the number to be nearer to 1 in 100).

Asperger syndrome is characterised by the presence of 3 major functional impairments, in the absence of general learning difficulties. These impairments occur in:

- social interaction and social relationships
- verbal and non-verbal communication
- imagination, behaviour and flexibility of thought

Supporting Students with Asperger Syndrome at University

Strategies for Support

The Disability Discrimination Act stresses the importance of institutions responding proactively to the needs of disabled students by building upon existing structures and procedures. The challenge is to utilise the skills, knowledge and understanding required to enable students to build on their strengths. Using the 10 main features of the CLASS model it is possible to draw up a “menu” of “reasonable adjustments”. However, each student is a very distinct individual and the support should be tailored appropriately.

Day-to-day Academic Life

It is worth ensuring a good overall awareness of Asperger Syndrome for all staff in contact with the student. Contact Kirsty Wayland at the DRC for assistance (kw226@cam.ac.uk).

Guidance for Conducting Interviews with Applicants Declaring Asperger's Syndrome

- Offer en-suite accommodation, if possible, if staying overnight
- Check eating preferences
- Offer a guide at all times to stop them getting lost
- Offer a little extra time at interview, say 10-15%
- Be aware that eye contact and body language may be unusual, as may tone of voice.
- You may wish to consider the possibility of meeting the applicant informally before the interview. Make this clear this has no bearing on the outcome of the selection process.
- The applicant may have difficulty interpreting signals from the interviewer, and knowing when to stop.
- The applicant may find it difficult to switch rapidly between topics.
- Ask straightforward questions and avoid using non literal language

NB. 'Fitness to practice' issues for medical and veterinary students should be discussed with Occupational Health.

Support Available at University

There is a range of support available at the University of Cambridge for students with Asperger Syndrome. The package will be tailored for each student and may include technical solutions eg a pda for help with organisation, or personal solutions eg a note-taker or mentor. Examination conditions can be adjusted to provide students with an environment where they feel most comfortable .

For home students this will be funded by the Disabled Students' Allowance. For international students we have a loan pool of equipment available on a first come first served basis and there are small bursary funds which may provide some assistance with necessary expenses.

Disabled Students' Allowance

The Disabled Students' Allowance for home undergraduates is funded by the Student Loan Company. Home graduate students who are funded by a Research Council should apply to the research council for their DSA. Those who are, self-funded or funded by bodies who do not give a Disabled Student's Allowance, should apply to their Local Authority. Students from overseas are not entitled to a DSA. In all cases evidence will be required in the form of a diagnosis.

Once the funding body has accepted that the student is entitled to a DSA they will require a needs assessment, which is usually undertaken at an Access Centre. This will make comprehensive recommendations for support, both assistive technology and personal. This report is usually forwarded to the relevant member of staff at the Disability Resource Centre to enable the appropriate support to be put in place. This report is shared, with the student's consent, with the Tutor and the Director of Studies, or Supervisor. The support permitted is cash-limited.

Typically, the following support is suggested:

- Own Computer
- Personal Organiser
- Digital recorder for lectures and/or note-taker
- Voice Recognition Software
- En-Suite accommodation
- Examinations under special conditions
- Travel allowance
- Photocopy allowance
- Book Allowance
- Specialist Course software Allowance

Non medical Assistance

- note takers
- book fetchers
- mentors

The Disability Resource Centre maintains a register of non medical assistants who are available to provide this support.

Our mentors are typically mature individuals from outside the university, often with counselling or social work backgrounds, or graduate students. All have current CRB clearance. They meet with their mentees on a regular basis and help with organisational and life skills.

Health and Safety and Discipline

Occasionally the behaviour of students with AS gives cause for concern. Anxiety and impaired ability to judge the feelings, actions and reactions of others may lead to highly charged social situations. It should be stressed that this happens rarely in our experience.

People with AS actively learn and practice social skills, but often this does not come naturally. Observing “social niceties” may be a conscious act all the time rather than unconscious natural behaviour. This is hugely stressful and can lead to “explosions”. Asperger Syndrome does not have periods of remission, it is present 24/7.

There can be problems with noise, food, crowds, environmental distractions, etc., to which a student with AS can apparently over-react. Acute hypersensitivity, to the point of real physical pain underlies this.

Students with AS are also extremely vulnerable to bullying and exploitation.

However, in a University environment, either in residential or teaching areas, basic standards of behaviour for the health and safety of all have to be observed. The Disability Discrimination Act expects us to make *reasonable* adjustments. It does not give licence to violent or abusive behaviour. Normal disciplinary procedures should be applied. However, a *reasonable adjustment* would be to make absolutely sure that the student has the rules and behaviour expected explained in very clear, unambiguous terms, and that he/she fully understands. A third party (with the student’s consent) who knows and understands the student well may be helpful in this situation, such as a parent, psychologist or mentor.

The table on the next page offers specific ideas for coping strategies for students with Asperger Syndrome.

Academic Issues

DIFFICULTY	STRATEGIES
<p>Sensory Sensitivity</p> <p>Most common sensitivities involve sound and touch, but may also include taste, light intensity, colours and aromas.</p> <p>High levels of strip lighting may cause discomfort especially when the a light is faulty and flickers</p> <p>Types of noise that may be perceived as extremely intense include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">– <i>Sudden, unexpected noises such as telephone ringing, animal noises or the fire alarm.</i>– <i>Infrequent noises such as air-conditioning.</i>– <i>High pitched continuous noise.</i>– <i>Confusing, complex sources of noise such as in crowded areas.</i>	<p>Be aware that normal levels of auditory and visual input can be perceived by the student as too much or too little.</p> <p>Keep the level of stimulation through lighting or amplification within the students ability cope.</p> <p>It may be possible to avoid some sounds but, when they cannot, an early warning may help.</p> <p>Minimise background noise where possible. This may be possible by closing some windows or suggesting that the student sits nearer to the lecturer and away from the source of distraction.</p>
<p>Limited Range of Interests</p> <p>The student may have an in-depth knowledge about one or two subjects and be focussed upon them.</p>	<p>Utilise the student's skills and knowledge and attempt to extend these to new areas.</p> <p>The student may interrupt at inappropriate times to give their own views. This may be because they are unaware of the format of the lecture or tutorial. This may need to be made explicit explaining that the lecture and students benefit from a range of student views.</p> <p>State clearly the expectations of the lecture environment but be prepared to consider compromises that do not interfere with other student learning or subject standards.</p>

<p>Supervisions</p> <p>Student may find difficulty understanding the rules of social interaction, therefore small group work can be stressful and confusing.</p> <p>Student may withdraw or dominate.</p> <p>The student may react badly to or fail to comprehend criticism of his or her work.</p>	<p>Consider one-to-one supervisions, or allow a short time afterwards (on their own) with the supervisor.</p> <p>Ensure that feedback is specific and constructive, not vague and generalised. Remember the student may have difficulty interpreting nuances, may be a perfectionist and fairly inflexible, but may also be very sensitive to criticism.</p> <p>Help the student build on their academic strengths.</p> <p>Ensure that the instructions for the work to be prepared for the next supervision are clear, preferably written down and given out.</p> <p>Reference: <i>Managing Asperger Syndrome at College and University</i> by Juliet Jamieson and Claire Jamieson. Pages 54 to 57 offer good guidance on this area.</p>
<p>Private study</p> <p>The student may be very sensitive to the environment.</p> <p>Libraries may be either so frightening or so absorbing that the student has difficulty using them effectively.</p> <p>The student may be a perfectionist and never satisfied with the standard of their own work, leading to poor time management and serious stress.</p>	<p>The Director of Studies or Supervisor may need to give the student extra time between supervisions to monitor and guide the progress of an assignment and help student to “know when to stop”. They can help the student build on their academic strengths.</p> <p>Guidance from a study skills support tutor may be effective.</p> <p>A mentor or tutor can help a student to manage their time effectively, and build in breaks and relaxation. Use of a detailed written timetable can help.</p> <p>A mentor or tutor can help with drawing up a strict timetable. Reference: <i>Managing Asperger Syndrome at College and University</i> by Juliet Jamieson and Claire Jamieson. Good guidance on this area and a pro-forma time management chart.</p> <p>It may be possible to arrange extended library loans.</p>

<p>Lectures</p> <p>May find it difficult to find the venue.</p> <p>May find it difficult to organise self into regularly attending.</p> <p>May find a lecture environment very stressful</p>	<p>Students may need help with familiarisation with the area before the start of term.</p> <p>Recording routes, landmarks, bus stops, etc., onto a MP3 player or similar may help.</p> <p>A student may need explicit knowledge of the time it takes to get from one part of the college to the other, where lectures are to take place. He/she may need to be supported visually with a more detailed timetable linked to a map.</p> <p>A student might need help to set reminders or prompts onto a PDA or mobile phone.</p> <p>Reserving a suitable seat where distractions such as light flickering blinds and squeaky seats are minimised, can help. Site custodians are usually willing to reserve seats.</p> <p>Accept that the student may find the lecture environment so distracting that he/she feels they gain nothing from being present and allow them to work independently.</p> <p>Accept that stress may overwhelm the student and he or she may need to escape. Help to identify a safe quiet area near the lecture theatre where a student can calm down.</p> <p>Ensure handouts or notes are available. Allow the student to record the lecture or have a note taker if required.</p> <p>Ensure the instructions for follow up work are clear and unambiguous.</p>
<p>Reading Lists</p> <p>Inability to assess relative importance of texts.</p> <p>Inability to prioritise.</p> <p>Tendency to read every book cover to cover, leading to poor time management and stress.</p>	<p>Help to choose and prioritise</p> <p>Give very clear instructions, for example: A is very important - read all of it, B is good, look at chapter 3.</p>

<p>Exams</p> <p>The student may have difficulty understanding the exam instructions which can be obscure.</p> <p>Student may have difficulty allocating the time between questions.</p> <p>The student may have handwriting difficulties.</p> <p>The student may have difficulty interpreting what the questions are actually asking for.</p> <p>The student may find the unfamiliar environment very upsetting or distracting.</p> <p>The student may focus on answering one question in huge detail to the detriment of the rest of the paper.</p>	<p>Ensure that that the exam instructions are clear and understood. Practice similar papers.</p> <p>Examinations in college may be appropriate.</p> <p>Use of a computer may be appropriate.</p> <p>The use of a timer to help the student move through the paper may be appropriate. This will need to be worked out with the student beforehand to arrive at a well understood system.</p> <p>Recognise that the student may become stressed and therefore strategies may be required to calm them down.</p> <p>Extra time may be needed.</p>
---	---

College Life

<p>Induction</p> <p>May have difficulty with orientation.</p> <p>May have difficulty with crowds. May have difficulty with apparent disorganisation or spontaneity.</p> <p>May have difficulty transferring learned life skills from home to College.</p> <p>May find the Societies Fair too noisy and unpredictable.</p> <p>May have rigid ideas about food.</p> <p>May find the buttry too crowded or distracting.</p> <p>May miss mealtimes.</p>	<p>Suggest the student comes up a few days early or for a few days during the summer with a parent to orientate themselves and to organise themselves.</p> <p>Have carefully chosen and briefed college parents.</p> <p>Ensure that that he or she meets their tutor and that the tutor offers extra time and support.</p> <p>Give help to identify and join clubs, societies and sporting activities.</p> <p>Arrange for the student to meet with mentor (arrange through the DRC) if the student feels that a mentor would be helpful.</p> <p>Use the tutor or mentor to help with negotiating with the catering manager.</p> <p>Ensure self catering facilities are available if required.</p> <p>Help to identify a “comfortable” area of the buttry, but recognise that this may not always be available.</p> <p>Remember to include mealtimes in the timetable or set reminders on the PDA or mobile phone.</p>
<p>Accommodation</p> <p>May be annoyed or distracted by noise from others.</p> <p>Student may be very private about bodily functions.</p> <p>They may find organising clothing or cleaning or laundry difficult.</p> <p>They may have rigid routines.</p>	<p>Identify suitable accommodation before the start of the course.</p> <p>Allow the student to keep the same room throughout the course.</p> <p>If possible, offer en-suite accommodation.</p> <p>Brief the housekeeping staff and the Porters and enlist appropriate help with the clear understanding and consent of the student.</p> <p>A mentor can help with organisation strategies.</p> <p>Occasionally, social services care may be required.</p>

Emotional Vulnerability

May have difficulty coping with the social and emotional demands of University/College life.

Often have low self-esteem and may be prone to depression.

Easily stressed due to anxiety.

May have difficulty in tolerating making mistakes.

May have rage reactions and temper outbursts.

Consider a mentori (organised via DRC)

Consider increasing the awareness of peers of the difficulties that the student may be experiencing.

Again, consider a mentor (organised via DRC).

Identify relaxation classes that the student may wish to attend.

Remind the student about the counselling service.

Help the student to become aware of precursors to stress.

Explore sources of support for the student to develop strategies of stress/rage management.

A "social briefing" may be utilised to suggest strategies for reducing anxiety and anger management.

Certain rules may have to be negotiated for the sake of the individual's safety. (These may be similar to the words of warning provided by the student union for new students).

Useful Websites:

<http://www.aspergermanagement.com/>
www.skill.org.uk
www.autism-society.org
www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger
www.users.dircon.co.uk/~cns/index.html
www.autismconnect.org
www.asperger.org.uk
www.nas.org.uk
<http://www.umbrella-autism.org.uk/>
<http://www.autismresearchcentre.com>
www.aspergersyndrome.org

Useful Books:

Pretending to be Normal: Living with Asperger Syndrome
(1999), Liane Holiday Willey

A Guide to Successful Employment for Individuals with Autism
(1996), M Smith, R Belcher & P Jühr

Asperger Syndrome, A Guide for Parents and Professionals
(1997), Tony Attwood

A Guide to Asperger Syndrome
(2002), Christopher Gillberg

Martian in the Playground
(2000), Clare Sainsbury

Succeeding in College with Asperger Syndrome
(2004), John Harpur, Maria Lawlor and Michael Fitzgerald

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night –Time
(2003), Mark Haddon

Freaks, Geeks and Asperger Syndrome - A User Guide to Adolescence
(2002), Luke Jackson

Managing Asperger Syndrome at College and University
(2005), Juliet Jamieson and Claire Jamieson.