Keele
UNIVERSITY

Supporting Students with Autistic Spectrum Conditions and Asperger Syndrome

Student Services
DISABILITY AND DYSLEXIA SUPPORT

Learning and Professional Development Centre

Keele
UNIVERSITY

Autism is a **lifelong developmental condition** that affects **how a person communicates with** and **relates to other people** and the world around them, impacting different people in different ways. A substantial proportion of individuals with **Autistic Spectrum Conditions(ASC)** are of average or advanced intellectual abilities, although some have additional learning disabilities. **Asperger Syndrome (AS)** is sometimes diagnosed in individuals with ASC.

1) How might ASC affect someone at university?

Individuals with **ASC** experience, to greater and lesser degrees, difficulties with **social communication**, **social interaction** and **social imagination**. Students with ASC may experience difficulties which present in the following ways whilst at university:

- Difficulty forming relationships; communicating and working in groups; picking up unwritten social rules; public speaking; and, interpreting jokes, sarcasm, figures of speech and non-verbal communication (e.g. facial expressions, tone of voice).

- May have a very literal understanding of language and use monotone speech.

- May avoid eye contact and appear to not be paying attention in classes.

- Being stressed or distracted by background noise, lighting, crowding.

- Difficulties with orientation around campus and getting lost.

- Difficulty coping with unfamiliar situations and change, e.g. to timetables, course arrangements, room numbers.

- Difficulty interpreting complex sentences, ambiguous questions in assignments/exams and making sense of academic requirements.

- **A lack of understanding about why something needs to be done, uncertainty about how much time to spend on particular study tasks or where to focus efforts, and a tendency to focus on key areas of interest to the detriment of other aspects of the course/curriculum.**

- Difficulty managing time, planning and organising workload.

- May ask questions that seem obvious or unnecessary.

- Concern about disability being misunderstood and not knowing who to ask for support.

- Inflexibility in thought processes; prone to anxiety and obsessive/compulsive behaviour; tendency to go off at tangents/talk too long about specialist interests.

- Lack of understanding of the concept of danger, e.g. busy roads.

2) Suggested teaching and learning adjustments

Teaching resources/materials, classroom set-up and teaching practice

- **Don't make any assumptions** about students in advance. Remember that students with ASC will experience different types of social difficulty and will utilise different support strategies. Be prepared to meet with students before teaching commences to get to know their individual needs.

- **Don't focus only on challenges** the student is facing, but identify students' strengths and how they contribute positively to study situations. Many students with ASC have strong dedication to their subject, high work ethic and pay close attention to detail.

- Students may have a **support worker in classes**.

- **Give students and their support workers time to prepare** by providing presentation slides (PowerPoint, Google slides, Keynote etc.), handouts and other teaching resources in advance of class sessions (i.e. upload to the KLE and send email reminders). This will allow students plenty of time to access, print and read materials.

- **Provide reading lists as far in advance as possible**, clearly highlighting and emphasising key chapters and articles as well as core from secondary readings, enabling students to prioritise.

- **Support students to revisit and revise lecture content** by using lecture capture technology or allowing audio recording of lectures. If students have a reasonable adjustment in place to allow audio recording of lectures, this must be permitted.

Disability Support and Inclusive Teaching and Assessment at Keele

- **Set boundaries and expectations and provide clarity and structure:**

  - **Be clear about study expectations**, rules and boundaries.
  - Check that all information you give to students is **concise and unambiguous**.
  - Always **break processes down** using clear, step by step, well-defined and logically sequenced instructions with opportunities for checking understanding.
  - **Always explain why** you have asked a student with ASC to do something.
  - **Provide a clear overview** for each session and what will be covered.
  - **Explicitly outline Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)** and revisit ILOs at the end of each session.
  - **Provide very clear instructions about teaching/meeting/tutorial locations** and check that the student understands. Meeting a student in a familiar location in the first instance may be helpful for the student.
  - A document provided in advance of classes with key arguments, concepts and new/difficult vocabulary is ideal, as is a glossary of concepts for each module.

- Try to ensure that teaching rooms are well lit by natural light and **background noise is kept to a minimum**, e.g. by closing doors and turning off noisy background equipment.

- **Planning, organisation and time management support** may be required, including in the use of diaries/organisers and planning software and helping to create structures and plans for study and revision to ensure even distribution of focus on assignments.

- **Support for working in groups** may be required to create a shared understanding of how group discussions and projects should be carried out in a way that respects all members. This may involve supporting the establishment of ground rules, monitoring group dynamics, or intervening when communication fails or any member is excluded. Students may find it difficult to appreciate that others have different approaches to producing work to themselves and may need support to understand/deal with this.

- **Communicate any changes with as much advance notice as possible** to avoid distress, including changes to familiar buildings, classrooms, course arrangements, etc.

- You may need to provide **support for oral presentations** and be prepared to discount marks when providing feedback for lack of body language, eye contact, or speaking very fast or slow.

- As students with ASC often find it difficult to ask for help, where appropriate you should check in with the student regularly to ensure they are on track with their current workload and have understood study expectations, instructions, deadlines, etc.
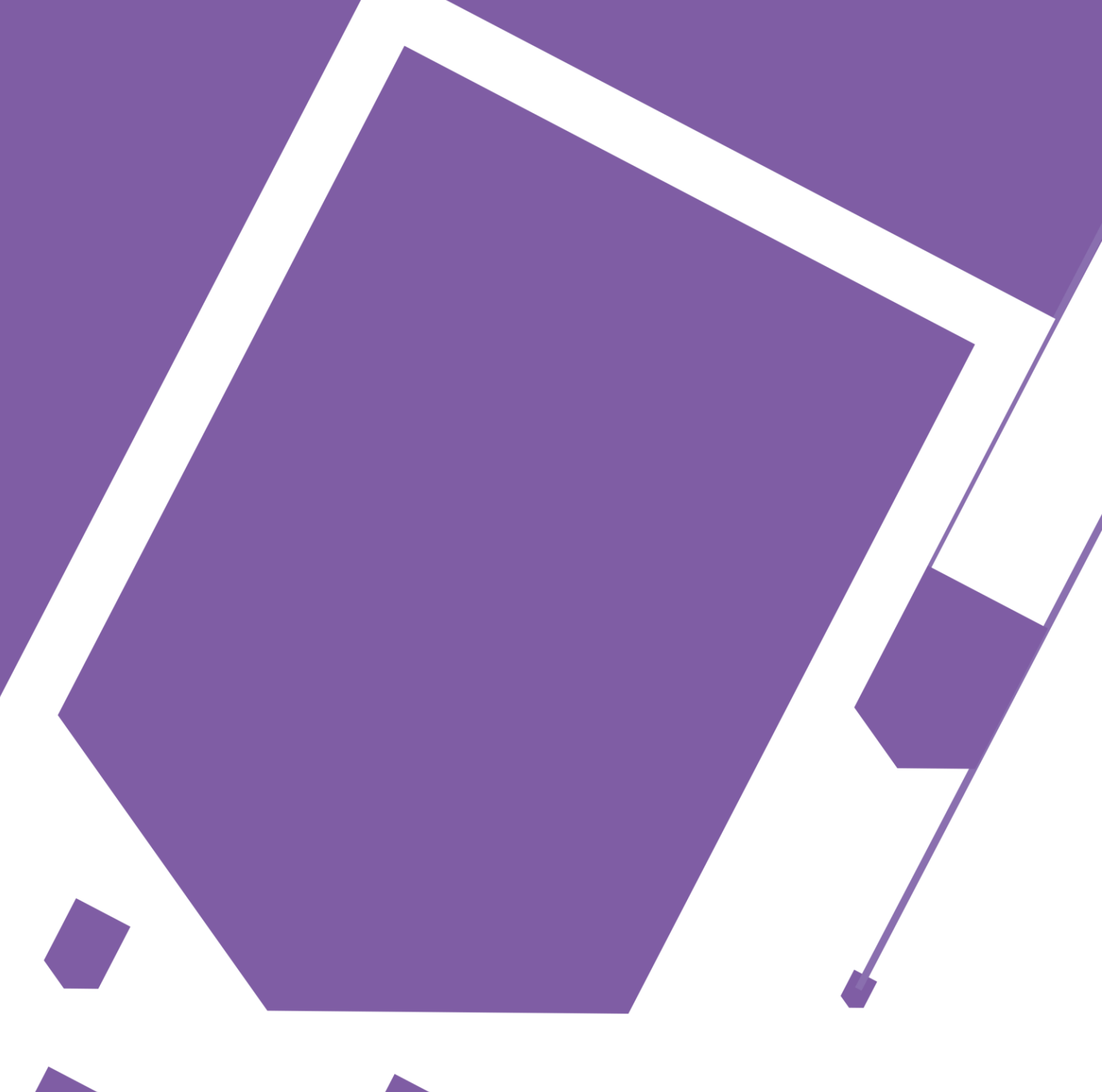
Assessment and feedback

- **Give students time to prepare and provide clarity and structure:**

  - As appropriate, provide assessment questions, details and deadlines **as far in advance as possible** using specific instructions and concise/simple language.
  - Always use **clearly defined assessment criteria** which link to the module ILOs.
  - **Notify changes** to assessments or deadlines in plenty of time.
  - If you find a student is misinterpreting assignment briefs discuss this with the student directly, breaking things down into clearly defined steps.
  - Be mindful of potential misinterpretations/misunderstandings when marking.
  - Give very direct feedback in typed format, using specific examples of how a point could be improved, setting comments against assessment criteria.
  - Demonstrate to students where and how to submit assessments electronically using step-by-step instructions.

- Students **may require specific adjustments for exams and other assessments, including the provision of alternative forms of assessment** where necessary. Discuss requirements with your local Disability Liaison Officer (DLO), examinations officer and as required, contact Disability and Dyslexia Support (DDS) for advice.

3) Bibliography and additional reading

This resource has been produced using a [best practice guide for lecturers and tutors](#) produced by the [Autism&Uni Project](#) led by Dr Mark Fabri of Leeds Beckett University, as well as information provided on [The National Autistic Society](#) website.

> *This resource was produced in 2018, updated January 2022*
> *Disability and Dyslexia Support*