

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

## 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:

- **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:**