

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 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: