

A Quick Guide for Supporting Students with Asperger's Syndrome: Laboratory & Observatory Technicians

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:

- **Have you made last-minute changes to equipment or the organisation of the lab?** People with AS can find it hard to cope with change and unexpected events.
- **Have your Health & Safety instructions been fully understood?** AS students may find 'simple' instructions difficult to understand.
- **Are AS students appearing to behave 'differently' from other students?** Certain social skills may not be intuitive to some people with AS and you may interpret their behaviour as abrupt or rude.
- **Do AS students seem distracted in your lab? Some people with AS are hypersensitive to sensory stimuli** e.g. a flickering strip light may be so distracting that the student cannot concentrate in a lab session.

What you can do to support AS students in your lab/observatory:

- Check with the appropriate staff member to see if there are any AS students in your laboratory/observatory sessions.
- If your School/Department has one, **contact the AS Academic Contact or mentor as soon as you observe an issue arising** concerning an AS student. A short email sent early to the right person can dramatically improve the chances of the issue being resolved before it is too late, and is likely to reduce your workload in the long term.
- Try to give clear and early notification of any **changes** e.g. movement of equipment or room changes. If for example, equipment has been moved it may benefit the student to be told exactly where it will be before they arrive at the laboratory session.
- Wherever possible **give clear, step by step instructions**. It is a good idea to check that each Asperger's Syndrome student fully understands your Health & Safety instructions for the laboratory. Talk to the student, or ask the appropriate member of staff to confirm their understanding.
- Try to maintain a **thick skin** as a defence against the possible directness of the students. 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.
- It is important to avoid **stereotyping** AS students. They will be very different from each other.

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: