

Strategies Which Increase The Likelihood Of Success At University Of Students With Asperger's Syndrome

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Editorial comment (GAP Oct 06)

Nicola Martin manages the Disabled Student Support Team at Sheffield Hallam University. She has recently undertaken an in-depth study of support available for students with Asperger syndrome (AS) in higher education with a view to developing good practice guidance. This paper discusses the recommendations arising from this study. It is based on responses from over 170 HE staff that have direct contact with students with AS in over 15 universities. In addition, 8 people with AS currently studying at UK universities provided information about the type of support they feel would be helpful. A Powerpoint presentation summarising the main points of the study is available electronically from the author who can also provide a full or half day workshop on request via Sheffield Hallam University. This paper will be invaluable to students with AS and to all who are engaged in supporting these students at University. Many of the recommendations can also be considered in other settings across the age span.

Introduction

It is highly likely that University staff will meet students with AS, particularly in Science-based courses, engineering, architecture and ICT, areas in which students with AS often do very well. The majority of students in this study were young male science undergraduates with good grades in their Science A levels. Asperger syndrome has received a lot of media attention and staff often feel nervous and ill equipped to deal with someone who may, in their imagination, conform to the Rain Man stereotype. The reality is somewhat different and students known to have AS cope well, if given appropriate support.

The profiles of people with AS are different and there may be some individuals who do not need a diagnosis or specific support. Where to draw the line in terms of giving and sharing the diagnosis and the potential benefits and drawbacks is the subject of much

debate (Murray, 2005), but it is important in a paper such as this, to point out that where staff think a person might have AS – or may know the student has AS, this does not automatically mean that that student needs help. That said, there are many aspects of University life which a student with AS is likely to find difficult and so it is important for staff to know the types of problem that might occur and to establish with the individual student whether such problems are true for them. There will be students at Universities with AS (both diagnosed and undiagnosed) who need specific support but who do not receive this and who may drop out of their course, fail their exams or have a fairly miserable time at University. It is students in this latter group who require attention. It is also important to avoid developing the sort of stereotype which results in 'genius pressure'.

Type of support required

Reliability and consistency are the key elements to successful backup. Success is most likely if systems are in place before the start of the course, and organised in such a way that parameters are communicated explicitly and sufficient flexibility exists so that skills and responsibilities extend across staff members. A student with a clear timetable and an understanding that they will be notified in advance if changes are about to occur is likely to develop a sense of security which will result in diminishing anxiety levels. A holistic view is required which understands that academic work is only part of University life, so planning to enable the student with AS to manage practically and socially is also needed.

Family input often plays a crucial role in enabling students with AS to manage at University . Studying from home is not uncommon. University staff have to balance the understanding that a high level of parental involvement is likely, with respect for the feelings, wishes and aspirations of the student with AS who may be trying to develop a greater degree of independence.

The guidance presented here adopts the social model of disability. By making the environment less disabling for individuals with AS, the impact of the impairments which could present difficulties in a less enabling context, may be minimised. Rather than concentrating on a medical model to perceived impairments as barriers, the social model emphasises finding ways over, through and around potential obstacles. Celebrating difference and diversity rather than perceiving people with AS as other, or impaired, is the positive position which is advocated here. This is congruent with the

view held by many (but not all) people with AS who do not classify themselves as disabled.

Asperger syndrome

AS is not rare and diagnosis can be ambiguous and is not exclusively given in childhood. It is likely that HE staff will come across students for whom AS has been recently diagnosed, and those who received a diagnosis as a child. Individuals react emotionally to the label in varying ways and with various degrees of understanding, and reactions may well change over time. Some students are uncomfortable with the idea that they are perceived as different. 'Asperger syndrome Pride' may be the reaction of others. The difference versus disability debate is relevant here.

Issues of disclosure

Some staff in this study said they thought they had students with AS, but the student had not disclosed their diagnosis. Caution is urged as the person may not have AS, or may have chosen not to disclose. In either case they may be insulted or made anxious by the suggestion that they have AS. Such an intervention needs careful thought and skill. The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) Part 4 (2002) is very clear that 'informed consent' must be obtained from a disabled student before any information about them can be shared with a third party. This is absolutely non negotiable. Therefore, any idea about discussing the requirements or behaviours of a student with AS with their fellow students, parents, or other staff or agencies can not be indulged.

It is possible to be supportive without necessarily labelling an individual. While some students will talk about their AS, others may be less willing, or may not perceive themselves as having a disability. Sensitivity to the individual's feelings is essential as it is possible to cause distress by offering assistance, which is viewed as unnecessary or intrusive. It is necessary to be open to the possibility that additional disabilities, including dyslexia and epilepsy can be present, and problems with depression and anxiety may occur chronically or intermittently.

Seeing the individual rather than the syndrome is essential, therefore advice given here comes with a health warning. No two people with AS are the same. Staff are required under DDA Part 4 to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate

behaviours arising from a disability. This is not always easy, particularly if staff are unaware of how AS can affect behaviour.

Potential strengths of students with Asperger syndrome

Whilst all students with AS will differ from each other, there are some areas which are likely to be true of most students in this group which can act in their favour. They often have a genuine and deep interest in their area of study and are likely to spend many more hours than peers working on tasks and assignments and spend less time on social pursuits. Reliability is something which students with AS not only value in others but also often display in their own behaviour. An unusual and highly entertaining sense of humour is not uncommon and looking at ideas from a refreshingly different angle is a common and almost defining characteristic. (The Disability Equality Duty (2005) encourages institutions to embrace the positive so lets do that here).

Potential difficulties for students with Asperger syndrome

It is important to note that some students with AS are not very accepting of the picture of themselves that the following descriptions depict. The role of HE staff is to embrace the positive and empower students, and not to classify them in a way which may be disabling, so caution in interpretation is urged.

Social issues

One of the main problems that most students with AS experience in the University context is difficulty with social interactions. They may have no friends, or be vulnerable to exploitation by peers they perceive to be friends (eg students who constantly expect drinks to be bought for them without reciprocating). Other students may perceive some people with AS as 'odd', and they may have problems with 'fitting in' partly because of other people's reactions. Body language and eye contact can appear awkward. Empathising with others is something a student with AS can find extremely hard so they may not realise how their behaviour is perceived, (eg when they are boring people). Peers may ignore, isolate, include, tolerate, like or admire an unusual character, particularly someone with an interesting take on life or an area of impressive ability. Media stereotypes of AS may impact positively or negatively on the way other students behave.

The ability of neurotypical people to empathise with those with AS is rarely discussed, as the literature focuses almost exclusively on lack of empathy as an autistic trait. Encouraging values of tolerance and acceptance and the development of empathy in other students is something which merits consideration. It is possible to develop a climate which fosters mutual support without the need to label anybody. Bullying is something which students with AS described as lessening after their school days were over. Although this is very positive, it is important for staff to remain vigilant to the possibility, in a low key-non intrusive way.

Communication

Communication may be more impaired than it first appears. Even if the student has superficially good language, they may have difficulty with some aspects of comprehension and a tendency to take things literally. Expressions like *'take a leaf out of his book'* for example, are confusing. The language required for articulating feelings may be limited and the student may not think to ask for help. On the other hand, s/he may make extraordinary demands on the support service because of an inability to work out what is reasonable. *'Call in to Student Services any time'* for example, could result in daily visits).

Clear, straightforward, unambiguous language is essential to avoid confusion. Jokes and sarcasm may possibly be misunderstood. Understanding of instructions for exam and assignment questions should be checked so that help can be given before time is wasted. In lectures, the student may need to be brought into group discussions by being asked direct questions and /or clear guidelines during discussion sessions. It may be difficult for them to stick to the point if they have become fixated with a minor detail for example. Providing a reminder of the topic and asking the student specific questions can help to bring them back on task. Social conventions, such as not dominating discussions, shouting out or interrupting, may need reinforcing in some instances. Emphasising, sensitively the message that the language used in the pub is not necessarily appropriate in the lecture theatre may also be necessary.

Behavioural issues

If it is necessary to tell a student with AS something about their behaviour directly, obviously, this should not be done in front of peers because of the potential humiliation this could cause. A popular myth prevails that people with AS do not experience

embarrassment. This is usually not the case. As logic would suggest, if someone is doing their best to fit in, and their failings are pointed out publicly, this is very unlikely to be helpful. Occasional reports of other students complaining about the person with AS, for example shouting out in lectures, were evident in this study. Reassurance from staff that this will be discussed, confidentially, is adequate. There is no need to explain that the behaviour is due to AS. On the other hand, if the student with AS has negotiated a way they would like information shared with peers, this could be helpful. Some people chose to generate a short statement about themselves, during the Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) process, which they could choose to give out or not. Importantly, this remained within the control of the student, rather than staff, parents or others.

Areas of intense interest

The student may have, or develop, areas of intense interest (and this can become the sole topic of conversation). If their fascination is directly related to their course it may be very motivating. Alternatively, it could be a barrier to learning. If, for example, a student does not see the point of completing a particular element of a course, which is required, and spends disproportionate time on a more interesting element, the resulting potential for failure may well need to be made explicit. It is possible to point out that it is not necessary for the student to enjoy or feel particularly stimulated by a problematic aspect of the course. It is however essential that work in the given area is completed to a specified standard in order to achieve the desired qualification. Appealing to a desire not to disappoint a third party is probably not useful, as intrinsic motivation is likely to be a more effective driver.

Application of knowledge can create challenges for some learners with AS. Analysis, comparison, interpretation, synthesising information from a range of sources, and interpreting require a range of skills including the ability to generalise and empathise. Some learners with AS are highly successful at GCSE level and then struggle when expected to work more analytically. Social Science subjects attract fewer students with AS than do the areas of physical sciences, mathematics, ICT and engineering-subjects which de-emphasise the social context of learning to an extent.

As an individual progresses in his or her academic career, opportunities for narrow specialisation will increase and the products of in depth investigation valued.

Wittgenstein, Newton and Einstein are sometimes quoted as examples of individuals with AS associated with genius and achievement (Fitzgerald, 2005).

Anecdotal evidence suggests that some people with AS have a very unusual learning style, It may not be possible for HE staff to understand the processes behind the learning in every instance. Strong visual perception is sometimes evident and it may be possible to help the student to make use of visual strategies if this is the preferred mode. Multi sensory approaches and activities to facilitate personal organisation can be helpful. Some students reported making use of the sort of study skills sessions popular with some dyslexic students.

Affect and mood

Low self-esteem, depression and high levels of anxiety are common states, particularly in young adults with AS. This may well be exacerbated by moving away from home. Social isolation is hard to accept for a person with AS who will often have a strong desire for friendship and relationships. Conversely, individuals with 'able autism', rather than AS may be more content with their own company and less troubled by the need for interaction. Students may find it very hard to break into any sort of social scene at university. Structured opportunities, such as attending regular aerobics classes, may be more successful, particularly if they are timetabled in and therefore become part of the routine. The minefield that is Fresher's week requires careful navigation by the student with AS and support to join clubs and societies can be very helpful. A person with AS is likely to become a valued and highly committed member. Regular recreational opportunities can provide much needed structure to a week which can otherwise contain a lot of empty time which someone with AS may struggle to fill.

E mail can be quite an important lifeline to assist with alleviating anxiety and feelings of isolation. A system to ensure that reliable responses to email communications are possible will be necessary. Some guidance on the length of emails and how to frame questions may be useful.

Adherence to the familiar

Unpredictable changes in planned activities can result in confusion and upset and this may give rise to behaviours which others find challenging, which could in turn increase isolation from peers. Anticipated stressful events may have similar consequences. For

example, some students with AS are likely to experience extreme levels of stress around exam time. Advising a student of a change in routine can be as simple as putting a Post-it note on a door to advise that a lecture has moved. Without this sort of thoughtfulness, the learner with AS may find themselves at a loss to know what to do. Anything more than this may be unnecessary and leave the student feeling overprotected or singled out in an embarrassing way.

Difficult behaviour

The term 'difficult behaviour' represents a value judgement on the part of a third party. Actions someone else does not like are not limited to people with AS of course. However, some conflicts may arise because of the student with AS having limited understanding of social norms, and others being less than easy going (eg that it is not OK to take a motorbike to pieces in the middle of a communal living space). Problems may occur because of lack of social experience and an impaired ability to understand other people's motivation. Straightforward explanation about why it is not acceptable to use a shared front room in this manner is far more likely to be understood and result in behavioural change, than more subtle attempts to get the message across through sarcastic remarks or despairing looks.

The reactions of others can exacerbate difficulties, and negative responses often arise through the inability of a third party to empathise with an individual with AS, or a tendency to make assumptions about behaviour, for example, being the result of rudeness. A label may also prompt others to ascribe all behaviours to manifestations of Asperger syndrome.

Sometimes 'difficult behaviour' is perceived as such by other people because of their lack of understanding, for example, of a requirement to carry out some low-key ritualised activity. If a person with AS insists on lining up their pens before starting work for example, then it could be argued that it is unreasonable for someone else to define this as problematic. In other words, why shouldn't they do this, especially if it has a calming effect? Increasingly, Universities emphasise the importance of valuing diversity. If an individual behaves in an unusual way, classifying the behaviour as difficult does not sit comfortably alongside valuing diversity. If a particular unusual behaviour has no negative effect on the student with AS or on others, then it is reasonable to expect people not to interfere.

Sensory overload

Heightened sensory perception may make some ordinary situations, like using the refectory, seem unbearably stimulating. This in itself could result in ritualistic behaviours in an attempt to gain some environmental control, and the behaviour could enhance the impression that the individual with AS is 'odd' in some way. Avoidance of the refectory can be problematic, especially if the student is not used to cooking, and therefore not likely to be eating properly. Helping the student to work out where to sit in this sort of environment may well be helpful. One person described their need to sit in a corner so that sensory stimulus was limited because no one could walk behind them.

Creating a sympathetic environment

With a clear structure, an understanding of where to turn to for support and a sympathetic environment, students with AS can do very well. Examples of students with AS who have been successful indicate that high quality support early on can enable the learner to cope with less intervention later, when everything is becoming more familiar. On the other hand, people have floundered because seemingly trivial problems, which are often social and practical, rather than academic, have become insurmountable to them. It is important to note that help with coping with the day to day practicalities of life, such as shopping, cooking, and eating can be an essential requirement, so consideration to the sort of backup required in halls of residence for example is vital.

The following considerations should help in the process of providing a useful DSA assessment and planning an effective service which includes anticipatory reasonable adjustments as required by the DDA Part 4. An understanding and acceptance of the nature of AS will help service providers to negotiate appropriate support with the individual, and some quite simple strategies can make an enormous difference. It is essential, however, to focus on the individual and remember that students with AS are not all the same. It is not enough to simply apply the guidance suggested here, without thinking carefully about the individual in question and the context in which they operate. Overtly over-supporting someone can disempower and disable. Subtly backing them up is a more sensitive response.

Considerations

The following questions may help the institution to be positive, the DSA Assessor with their recommendations, the Disability Officer with service planning, and be useful to other staff who come into contact with students with Asperger syndrome:

Pre-entry

1. How does the institution market itself? Is it known for having a positive attitude and an understanding of the potential requirements of a person with Asperger syndrome? If so, is the information about the sort of backup which can be offered truthful? Organisations which over-promise and under-deliver are not effective in supporting students with AS who rely heavily on people being reliable.
2. Before entry to HE, is some sort of transitional planning possible so that the student has time to familiarise him or herself with the environment they are moving into (eg pre-entry Summer School or a chance to look at their room in residence before moving in)? It is desirable for the student to try things out because potential problems around imagining new situations in the abstract. Could a structured and constructive gap year be really helpful for some individuals who may then apply to University on the basis of known A level grades and with a DSA sorted well in advance.
3. Is there an opportunity to carry out a DSA needs assessment early so that support can be put in place from the beginning of the course? (DSA regulations mean that it is theoretically possible to do this from the April of the year of entry. The challenge is to secure appropriate diagnostic information to satisfy the student's local authority, and to find an Assessment Centre with a short enough waiting list and a sufficiently detailed understanding of AS.
4. Does the person carrying out the DSA assessment liaise closely (with the students permission) with the Disability Officer in the University when making support recommendations? (Increasingly the expectation is that a good quality needs assessment will include this). It is necessary to ensure that the DSA assessment is realistic about the sort of support which is feasible and that arrangements are expressed clearly so that boundaries are made explicit. A notetaker may be recommended for example, who can also help the student to organise his or her work. Support may be made available to assist with social activities. In each instance, roles, times and boundaries must be clear to avoid ambiguity. How is

communication with parents organised in the DSA assessment, in order to make sure that the student has the opportunity to put their view across? Ensuring that permission is gained to talk to parents and time without them in the room during the assessment is recommended.

5. Does the Disability Officer subsequently work with the student to negotiate how best any information sharing should be organised to assist people to understand the potential positive contribution and sort of support which is likely to be required? If advocacy backup is needed for this to be effective, what sort of strategies can be employed to make sure that the student is putting their views across, rather than being influenced heavily by the perceptions of a third part, such as a parent?
6. Is the university experience considered holistically, so that access to University life is not restricted to academic activity? (Potential social isolation, underdeveloped possible lack of independent living skills, such as cooking and managing money, are important considerations and, though not covered by DSA, support with these aspects of life can mean the difference between success and failure.).
7. Are the named people in the University managing the transition process in liaison with each other and in consultation with the student? (Parents are likely to have played a very large role in enabling their son or daughter practically and socially as well as emotionally, and can be an excellent source of advice, with appropriate permission from the student of course. Sensitivity is required to the possibility that parents' views may differ from those of their offspring).
8. Is staff development adequate, positive, timely (anticipatory) and available to all relevant (not just academic) staff? Residential services' personnel, for example, are likely to need advice. It is easy to assume that an articulate, well-presented young person has more ability to look after him or herself than they actually possess. They may well have relied heavily on parents and find it difficult to cope with practicalities, without fairly low key but reliable backup (eg an early morning call, being shown how to use the washing machine).
9. Do staff have the opportunity to consider their responsibilities under the DDA Part 4 in relation to what is required when working with a student with AS? (This could cover how behaviours associated with AS may manifest themselves in the

individual, appropriate responses from staff, course / environmental requirements, and an understanding of confidentiality, and issues around enabling a student who may be very sensitive about their disability). Is practical advice for staff presented tactfully enough so they feel confident in their ability to enable the student by providing reliable backup, rather than confused and worried by the ambiguity around the disability.

10. Are arrangements set up so that the student can make contact with the University, and receive an appropriate informed response if necessary during the summer holiday after leaving school /college and before starting as a University student? (Anxiety may build up during this phase because of the uncertainty).
11. Is it possible for a named person at the University make contact with the student during the pre-entry summer holiday to make sure they know what is going to happen on the first day? A brief phone call can make the difference between worry escalating and diminishing.

Is the student's first contact with the University planned (in liaison with parents/ appropriate provider) and evaluated afterwards so that any problems, which arise, can be addressed swiftly? (Is this the responsibility of a named individual)? Simple planning like ensuring that the student is met by someone who is able to show him/her around can make a big difference, as working out what to do in an ambiguous situation can pose a great challenge to someone with AS in an unfamiliar environment.

On the programme of study

12. Is there a method of helping the student to generate a clear comprehensible timetable as early as possible so they can develop a sense of security about where they are supposed to be, when and what for ? Are staff clear that unpredictable changes to this timetable will be very confusing to students with AS who may struggle to work out how to deal with the unexpected. A culture of informing of known changes in advance, with an email or a note on the door or similar, will help all students, not just those with AS.

13. Social experience may be limited when the student begins HE, and they may have relied quite heavily on family support for social contact. Is it possible to put some sort of regular recreational activity in place and provide appropriate backup to facilitate attendance? (The student may have never travelled independently on public transport, for example, and may need practical help with this). Can Fresher's week be planned really carefully to assist the student to develop a social timetable by joining clubs and societies?
14. Help to arrange health care, dentistry, and bank accounts may also be required. What sort of strategies can be employed to ensure that this is provided and monitored, and that the student is taking care of their health (eg by eating regularly)?
15. If a student is adamant that they do not require assistance and do not want others to know they have AS, what can be done to ensure that their right to confidentiality is not compromised? (The situation is most complex when a student is unable to relate to the effect of their behaviour on other people because of their own lack of empathy, or does not understand why aspects of course work are falling below standard. Often, very direct advice which describes the impact of an action on the student and does not contain a great deal of emotional content is required (eg '*you have to go on the field trip because if you don't you will fail the course*'). This response presents factual information without unnecessary emotional overload.
16. Is it possible to support students without labelling them? Arguably, if staff suspect that someone has AS, a low key approach to enabling the person to access reliable support services is likely to be more empowering in some instances than an approach which requires a diagnosis. Very careful consideration is vital before any interaction which involves mentioning AS to a student who has not disclosed. They may have a diagnosis which they do not wish to share and view a clumsy approach as highlighting their failure to blend in.
17. Do the staff feel supported and know where to go if they need help, and how can this be done in a way which will not compromise student confidentiality? (A one-off staff development event will not be enough as people can be left feeling that they have to cope because they have had ' the training'. Getting the message across

that support services need to be reliable and orientated towards problem -solving is helpful).

18. Is personal support provided, including assistance or monitoring in halls of residence, from the start of the course? problem for (Front loaded support in transition may well lead to greater independence later).
19. Are support arrangements made absolutely clear to the student, reviewed regularly and amended if necessary? (A single named person throughout the course may not be the best idea as over identification may lead to a dependent relationship, but the student needs to know what to do / where to go for support if they get into difficulties. A small team of people able to offer backup at a regular time each week is probably best as this is likely to be the most reliable system). A timetable which describes episodes of time limited support which occur at regular times through the week can be beneficial as this can be integrated into the routine.
20. Are transitions and changes which take place throughout the course managed in a way that minimises stress? (eg changing modules, around exam time). Wherever possible, can a student be notified of changes (eg to the timetable), in advance. Can some worry-inducing changes be avoided (eg could staying in halls for the duration of the course be an option?)
21. Are systems for communicating with the student made clear so that they know for example, to expect email instructions, electronic versions of handouts in advance of lectures, a text to warn of a room change or similar. Sometimes electronic communication is less stressful and has clearer boundaries than face-to-face interaction.
22. Are mechanisms in place to help the student work through ideas in order to see connections between aspects of the course and to generalise and apply learning across contexts? Lack of flexible imagination can be a characteristic of AS so support to do this is a legitimate, disability-related reasonable adjustment.
23. Does help with personal organisation, if required, extend to practical self help skills, such as shopping, as well as academic backup, like filing work properly?

Transitions and pre-exit support.

24. Is careful consideration given to the requirements an individual may have in relation to field trips, visits and work experience? It may be that the academic side of this activity is relatively straightforward, but advice on how to interact socially, what to wear, or where to catch the bus is required.

25. Is there enough flexibility in the system to facilitate exam arrangements, which minimise stress? Extra time or a separate room may be needed. The student may benefit from some control of the space to minimise sensory overload (eg they may choose to work with the blinds down). Exam instructions and questions should be expressed in unambiguous language and the format of the paper should be clear and familiar. The student may need prompting to go onto the next question and to understand time constraints. Rest breaks may be required. If the student has dyslexia in addition to AS or uses unusual, possibly pedantic language they should not be penalised for this. Practice with a reader or scribe will be essential if this is to be used, and changing personnel at the last minute would not be an option. The exam routine itself may be very stressful and should be made as clear as possible. Can alternatives to exams be explored in some instances?

26. Are systems flexible enough to ensure that the student is given every opportunity to succeed? (Credit accumulation and transfer, modular courses, flexible modes of delivery, timescale, and combined studies). Is a change of course within the same institution possible, where necessary? Is time-out an option and if so, is it possible to support the student in making sure this time is not wasted (eg by studying for an Open University module from home for a period of time).

27. Are end of course transitional arrangements for moving on supportive and sustained (eg with the support of specialist careers and supported employment agencies).

Finally

28. Is the approach positive, as The Disability Equality Duty requires, so that the student is seen as someone who can contribute and do well with appropriate

support, rather than a potential problem? Is this done without applying subliminal or overt pressure on the person with AS to be 'the next Einstein'?

29. Is there a thriving culture of valuing diversity within the organisation? If not, can The Disability Equality Duty be exploited as a vehicle for positive change?

30. Is the responsibility for supporting disabled students owned and shared by people at all levels?

Concluding comments

Students known to have AS have achieved in HE with enormous personal determination and the backup of sensitive support services and often family members. Others have managed without disclosing AS or seeking backup. Careful planning to ensure that reliable help is in place from as early as possible is most likely to facilitate success.

When staff are prepared and open to the idea that AS, an ambiguous hidden disability, is real, and that seemingly trivial things can create real problems, they feel more able to offer appropriate support. Often small adjustments designed to make routines predictable can alleviate potential difficulties quite easily. An attitude of valuing diversity and not making value judgements about what may be perceived as unusual behaviour is very helpful.

Staff feel more confident if they can access information which puts across the message that straightforward, unambiguous reliable backup is required by students with AS and they can play a valuable part in ensuring that this occurs. It is not necessary or desirable to 'hold the student's hand' all the time but it is essential to be clear about the services the student can expect, and reliable in their delivery. Help with practical and social activities is often as important as academic support, therefore personnel from all parts of the university would benefit from an awareness of their role in supporting students with AS.

All staff development activities need to caution against stereotyping and emphasise that no two individuals with AS are the same. A culture which values diversity and is committed to empowering people, the legislative requirements of the DDA, and an increasing familiarity with people with AS in the HE sector, are factors which are likely

to make University more user friendly over time. The Disability Equality Duty requires that disabled people are consulted and involved in the formation of disability equality schemes. Learners with AS may well be very vocal on the subject, if encouraged and supported . Practitioners are urged to talk to the students. The expertise lies with people with Asperger syndrome.

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