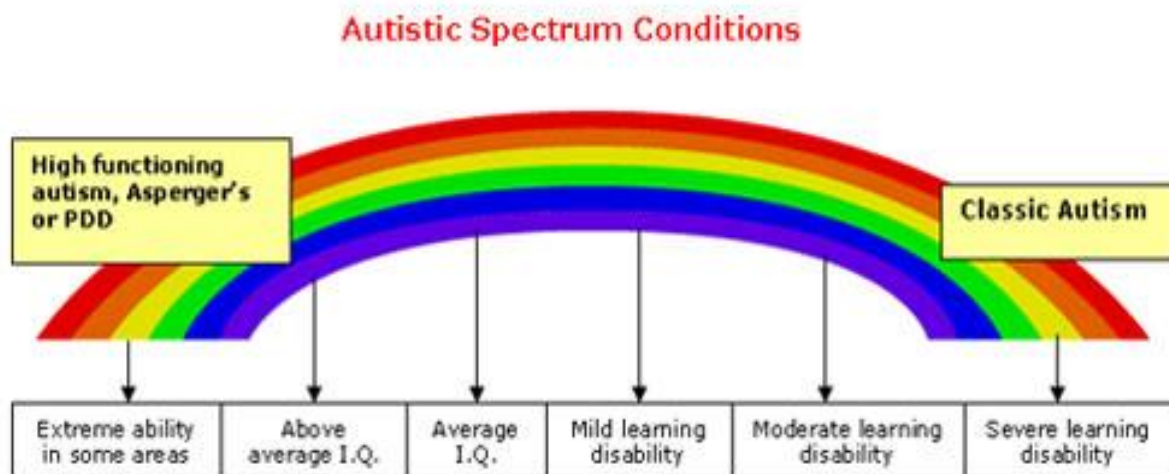


Guidance for Staff Working with Students with Autistic Spectrum Disorders

Classification and Characteristics

Autism is not one singular condition - individuals will fall somewhere on the autism spectrum, hence the term “Autistic Spectrum Disorder” (ASD). This ranges from non-verbal individuals with severe learning difficulties, to those with above-average IQs, often displaying extreme ability in particular areas. The majority of UCL students will have a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome or High-Functioning Autism.



Not everyone with ASD is the same, nor is it a condition which can be “cured”. Classed as a developmental disorder, we can refer to the characteristics of ASD; it influences the way people perceive and interact with the world, so is often intrinsically linked with personality. The main characteristics are:

- Social and emotional difficulties – developing close friendships, working co-operatively with others, anxieties around unstructured events/periods
- Language and communication – processing issues (particularly with verbal information), literal interpretation of language, difficulties reading body-language, facial expressions and gestures
- Flexibility of thought – difficulty coping with changes in routine, putting themselves in someone else’s shoes
- Sensory overload – can make certain situations difficult or even distressing i.e. a busy train. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lr4_dOorquQ

Those with ASD will display these characteristics to varying degrees, and will have different ways (and varying levels of success) in dealing with the issues they may present.

In modern society most of these characteristics would be seen as negative and potentially limiting, however it is important to consider the advantages and strengths which ASD students may display. For example:

- Fascination and intrigue with a particular area of interest can result in an encyclopaedic knowledge of certain subjects
- An impressive ability to focus and pay attention to detail
- Great ability in problem solving, offering a unique perspective of understanding
- A desire to recognise and value the facts – considering things at face-value, ignoring biases and agendas which may cloud judgement

UCL students have the opportunity to have regular mentoring sessions with in-house specialists to help with transition, talk through any issues they may encounter and develop strategies for overcoming them.

Impact on Study

In an academic context students with ASD may:

- Have difficulty adjusting to changes in surroundings and routine

This is particularly relevant for new students, though can be ongoing for those who find unfamiliar locations and routines stressful.

- Have issues giving presentations and participating in group work

Due to issues with social interaction some students may find course elements like this difficult. For example, they may unintentionally come across as abrupt or misinterpret sarcastic humour which can present problems establishing working relationships with other students when collaborating.

- Have difficulties understanding what is expected of them – may struggle without clear guidance

Students may find it difficult to know how and when to ask questions. They may take a very literal interpretation of language and find it hard to distinguish between vital and peripheral information.

Supporting and Teaching Students

Research shows that ASD students who receive appropriate support in a timely manner often thrive in higher education. Some examples of good practice include:

- Establish clear roles within the department so students know who to go to for particular issues
- Ensure timetables are adhered to consistently – give early notification of any changes where possible
- Give clear and unambiguous instructions and feedback – avoid using metaphor or sarcasm without literal explanation
- Consider the management of group work/discussions - establishing clear guidelines can help reduce anxieties. Intervene when communication appears to fail, division of workload seems unfair etc.
- As a personal tutor or supervisor consider scheduling regular meetings - a supportive relationship with a member of staff who knows the student well can be a great help

Reasonable Adjustments

- Provide reading lists and lecture notes in advance
- Allow student to record teaching sessions
- Explore alternative assessment options/adjustments for group work and presentations where students find these particularly challenging e.g. allow student to only present to those assessing, allow them to work continuously with those who they feel comfortable with etc.
- Allowance for adjustments where individual study is required in class/lab sessions e.g. some students may need to listen to music, be at the back of the room etc. to reduce anxieties and limit distractions
- Permit some flexibility with deadlines if requested

Further Information

For further information and guidance on ASD in a wider context please see the National Autistic Society Website:

<http://www.autism.org.uk/>