



Autism

Key support actions

- Use precise language; give clear and explicit details on course requirements and expectations
- Set-out precise ground rules for group discussions
- Try to keep timetabling and room locations as consistent as possible; give advance warning of changes
- Ensure feedback is direct and unambiguous; be explicit on areas for development and improvement

What is autism?

Autism is a developmental condition which affects the way people perceive and interact with the world. Everyone with autism is individual; their autism is part of their personality, and its impact varies from person to person.

A diagnosis of autism indicates a person falls somewhere on the autistic spectrum, ranging from those with above average IQs to those with severe global learning difficulties. The majority of students at LSE will be at the high-functioning end of the spectrum, previously referred to as Asperger's syndrome, which is no longer given as a diagnosis, though some students may identify with this term.

The main characteristics of autism are:

- A fixation on particular subjects or ideas
- A very literal interpretation of language; difficulties with metaphors, sarcasm etc.
- Difficulties reading non-verbal communication and social cues
- A strong need for routine and familiarity
- A rigidity of social imagination which makes it difficult to understand how another person feels in a given situation
- Acute sensory sensitivity

Impact on study

A fixation on particular subjects or ideas: students may get fixated on certain aspects of the subject area/topic, and devote too much time to these areas, not leaving enough to consider the breadth of understanding required. This may also be an advantage however – they may be intensely interested in their subject area and be extremely dedicated to developing their knowledge on it.

A literal interpretation of language: students may be misled where instruction is not explicit and literal e.g. a metaphor. A literal approach can mean they have difficulty in distinguishing between

core and peripheral information. They may for example, be compelled to read the entirety of a suggested text without specific instruction.

Difficulties reading non-verbal communication and social cues: this may make it difficult to interact in group discussions; students may not know how and when to interject or ask questions, and may come across as abrupt when it is not their intention. Similar difficulties are of course also implied here with group work.

A strong need for routine and familiarity: disruptions to timetabling, teaching locations etc. can cause distress, particularly if there is no prior warning.

Rigidity of social imagination: a difficulty in imagining someone else's point of view can create issues with group work.

Acute sensory sensitivity: this can make certain scenarios intensely distressing for some individuals, such as bright lights, loud noises etc.

Inclusive teaching

These are strategies of benefit to all students but will also help to remove barriers from students with autism:

- Consistent adherence to timetables
- Clearly structured teaching sessions
- Explicit use of literal language for all instructions, and as far as possible in more general usage
- A structured approach to office hours sessions; conduct the discussion in a linear fashion. A conceptual and theoretical approach to these sessions may of course be seen as pedagogically necessary, though be wary this approach may cause confusion
- Clear and unambiguous feedback which highlights areas for development and improvement
- Firm management of group discussions and monitoring of group work

Reasonable adjustments

Examples of reasonable adjustments which may be suitable to students with autism include:

- Priority seating in teaching rooms
- Directed reading lists with explicit instructions on relevant chapters, pages etc.
- Access to lecture recordings
- Access to specialist mentoring for autistic students
- Extended deadlines on a case-by-case basis
- Additional preparation and support for group work and presentations
- Adjustments to environment to minimise impact of sensory sensitivities

The legal position

Autism meets the criteria of a disability under the Equality Act (2010). As such the School has a legal obligation to make reasonable adjustments in order to ensure these students have equal access and opportunity in the education we provide.

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