

# TRANSITION TO UNIVERSITY

This is an updated version of the materials developed by the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre (OTARC) at La Trobe University. This material appears on the Neurodiversity Hub under a licensing agreement with OTARC.

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# STAFF

Are you a staff member at a tertiary institution? Find out more about how to support autistic students below.

For some base knowledge, you may want to watch the following video from the Organization for Autism Research Understanding Asperger's Syndrome: A Professor's Guide.

The information in this pamphlet was developed as part of the project "Supporting transition to and participation in tertiary education for students with an ASD" funded by the Department of Human Services (DHS, Victoria).

Please note, while this information is designed to support autistic students, a lot of the information and resources also apply to students with other neurodiverse variations.

# AUTISM DIAGNOSIS

## Key Points

**1** Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition that can affect behaviours, interests, interactions with others, as well as social and communication skills.

**2** About one in one hundred people are autistic, with a higher prevalence in males.

It is important to understand that not all autistic people have the same strengths. There are certain traits and characteristics autistic people may display.

**3** Strengths can include: attention to detail, good rote memory, straightforward and honest communication, and adherence to rules and routines when appropriate structure is in place.

**4** Autistic people may experience challenges with social, communication, behavioural, emotional, cognitive, sensory, and motor skills.

## What is autism?

Autism is a pervasive neuro-developmental disorder which affects social skills and communication, and impacts behaviours and interests. Different autism diagnoses include autism, Asperger's Syndrome, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDDNOS).

Prevalence estimates vary widely as autism has become more recognised; it is more prevalent in males, with about four males for every female with a diagnosis. Current research indicates that approximately one in 100 people are autistic.

## High-Functioning Autism and Asperger's

While a majority of autistic people also have an intellectual disability, about 40 to 45 per cent do not. Autistic people without an intellectual disability are referred to as high-functioning. Most higher education students with high-functioning autism are likely to have a diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome (many people refer to themselves as having Asperger's Syndrome) which is generally associated with intellectual and language skills in the normal range.

While people with high-functioning autism have good cognitive and language skills, their difficulties with social skills, communication and behaviours (such as the need to adhere to specific routines, or having strong interests), and other secondary characteristics often associated with autism (e.g. high anxiety, poor organisation) can affect their ability to cope and learn at university.

## Characteristics of autism

Although every autistic individual is different, there are certain traits and characteristics associated with these conditions.

### Strengths

Autistic people may have many strengths, which include:

- Sustained and heightened attention to detail on topics of interest
- Good rote memory
- Forthrightness in communications
- Adherence to routines and rules when appropriate structure is in place.

### Challenges

Autistic people may also experience challenges due to the core characteristics of autism and the

secondary problems that are common in these conditions. The three core characteristics of autism are related to the social, communication, and behavioural areas.

The secondary problem areas include emotional, cognitive, sensory and motor difficulties.

Some other groups that may also have these problems are students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), students with specific learning difficulties and students with mental health problems.

## Social

Many of the social difficulties that autistic people have are related to their communication difficulties. Autistic people have a tendency to interpret literally what another person says, affecting the way students interpret instructions given out by staff. This may lead to misunderstandings which have a negative impact on the student-staff relationships, peer relationships and student learning outcomes.

## Communication

Autistic students may experience communication difficulties such as:

- not wanting to communicate concerns to staff
- being unable to demonstrate knowledge in the particular form of assessment required by teaching staff
- preferring not to participate in group discussions and not to undertake group assignments due to communication challenges and high levels of anxiety.

## Behavioural

- Many autistic students have trouble being organised.
- One of the key academic problems resulting from poor organisation is that students are unable to hand in assignments and undertake assessments on time.
- Some students also find it hard to judge time.

## Emotional

Autistic students can have elevated levels of anxiety and are prone to becoming clinically depressed. One parent commented that autistic

students operate 'on a level of anxiety that is equivalent to Year 12 students, all the time'. The stress and anxiety may come from a range of factors and some are listed below.

### Classes and workload

a) Academic issues such as not understanding the lesson and being overwhelmed by the workload.

### Communication

b) Not being able to communicate with the academic staff.

### Routine and structure

c) Change in routine and transition into tertiary education; staff support can be a great help.

### Co-morbid mental health conditions

d) Many autistic students have other co-morbid conditions including anxiety disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder, and clinical depression, which need to be considered in relation to accommodations made to support autistic students and interactions with them.

## Cognitive

Autistic students tend to prefer structure and routine in their daily lives. Students can experience difficulty focusing on many things at the same time, take longer to process information, and can be easily distracted.

### Structure

This preference for structure includes the need for structure in academic settings and the difficulty experienced when this

structure is missing.

### Structure aids coping

Structure enables students to cope with the demands of their courses. It assists them to comply with assessment requirements. When some structure was in place, students were able to cope better.

### Multi-tasking

Many autistic students have difficulty focusing on multiple things at one time. For example, some students find it difficult to listen to the teaching staff in lecture/class whilst writing down notes.

### Information processing

For some students, it takes time to process new information.

### Distractions

Autistic people often have co-morbid attention difficulties. They are easily distracted and have difficulty shifting attention from one activity to another.

## Sensory and Motor

Autistic people are often highly sensitive to sensory stimuli. They can also experience difficulties with handwriting.

### Sensitivity to sensory stimuli

Many autistic students are over- or under-sensitive to certain sensory stimuli. For example, some students cannot function well in noisy environments. This may impact the students' ability to cope within tertiary education settings.

Students may use strategies to reduce the external stimuli, including not directly looking into the eyes of the other person while having a conversation.

### Difficulty with handwriting

Some autistic students have difficulty with fine-motor skills and have slow or poor handwriting.

This may impact students in a number of different ways, including not being able to write class notes down fast enough, unable to complete exams in the time allowed, and the examiner not being able to read his/her handwriting.

# SUPPORTING AUTISTIC STUDENTS

## KEY POINTS

1

The prevalence of autism in students at universities may be as high as one percent. As a faculty member, it is important to know how to support this growing population of students.

2

The learning environments in secondary and tertiary school are very different. The transition can be especially challenging for autistic students. There are things staff members can do to help students with the change.

3

A lot of the strategies to help autistic students will also help other students, including those with ADHD, mental health conditions, or learning differences.

4

Legislation gives autistic students the right to reasonable adjustments and alternative assessment arrangements. There are reasonable adjustments and alternative assessment arrangements that can help students with some of their difficulties. It is your responsibility to make sure the individual needs of each student is met.

Fifty-six per cent of Australians have a post-secondary qualification (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). However, people with high-functioning autism are less likely to achieve a post-school qualification, with many having poor outcomes. A UK study found there are fewer people with high-functioning autism who have a post-secondary qualification than expected. According to USA research, less than 40 per cent of autistic people attend post-secondary education and very few receive a degree. The failure to succeed in post-secondary education results in negative financial and personal costs for autistic people and their families. Education is an important component of obtaining future employment and is therefore a key to reducing the associated costs to communities, families and individuals.

### **One per cent of students may be autistic**

In the coming years, tertiary institutions may expect to enrol more autistic students.

Preliminary estimates indicate the prevalence of autism in university students may be as high as the current rate of autism in the general population (approximately one per cent). Meeting the needs of this growing student body will be

extremely challenging if tertiary institutions do not understand the support needs of these students.

## **Providing appropriate support**

Provision by staff of appropriate support for autistic students is invaluable to the future of these students. As a staff member who is currently working, or who may soon work with autistic students, it is important for you to build your knowledge about autism, understand how autism impacts upon your students, and identify strategies for working with these students. Also where necessary, to make reasonable adjustments to support them.

## **Equity**

Providing for autistic students is, fundamentally, an issue of equity. Autism is a chronic, life-long condition, and like other students with temporary or chronic conditions (e.g. visual impairment), autistic students may require one or more of a range of supports to assist them to reach their potential within the post-secondary education setting. Many of the strategies that you will encounter here

will also be valuable for other students in your classes, including students with ADHD, specific learning difficulties, or mental health conditions.

## **Transition to tertiary education**

Autistic students who are diagnosed before starting tertiary education have typically had a lot of support from family and teachers in high school. These students will be accustomed to a high level of support and may experience difficulties without similar support in the tertiary education environment. Other students may enter tertiary education without a formal diagnosis, and life may become difficult in the less structured tertiary setting, leading to an eventual diagnosis. When students transition into university, where there are not as many support structures, the transition period can be extremely challenging.

## **University**

University is an adult learning environment, although student ages can range from fifteen to eighty. Students are expected to be



independent learners and complete a lot more work, often in shorter time periods, than at secondary school. There are different methods of delivering course content, including classrooms, lectures, online, flexible delivery, off-campus, and hands-on training.

Studying at university can be particularly challenging for autistic students due to the characteristics of these environments, which are quite different from secondary schools, i.e.:

- attendance at lectures is not compulsory
- self-directed studying is expected
- lectures often have hundreds of students
- different teaching methods are used
- no hand-holding for students is provided
- there are no 9 am to 3 pm daily routines
- there is less interaction with teaching staff
- there are few practice-runs
- there is an expectation of independent learning.

## **Transition Support**

Rather than make assumptions about the impact of students' diagnoses on their learning, educators and disability support liaison officers need to ask autistic students what assistance or accommodations they need.

A good place to begin is to collect up-to-date information on the individual as a whole. Getting to know the autistic individual who is beginning the post-secondary transition process is the foundation for developing a successful transition plan. This includes understanding their background, the skills they already have and the skills they need to acquire.

## **Tailoring the transition support**

Students at the same institution and with similar diagnoses may have very different needs, depending on the following factors:

- 1) type or extent of impairment
- 2) previous education experience
- 3) skills and strategies that they have learned
- 4) course nature and requirements

5) teaching format and learning environment

6) level and field of study.

More importantly, as with any disability, it is the implications of the condition, and the social context of the disability, that are important, rather than the 'diagnosis' in itself.

The essential components of effective transition planning include:

- student involvement in their own transition planning
- parent and family involvement in transition planning
- a good fit between the student, the choice of university and the course
- a meaningful curriculum
- student-orientated and outcome-based goals.

### **Appropriate Support**

While there is a set of core difficulties that lead to a diagnosis of autism, all autistic people are individuals and there is inherent variability in their personalities, behaviour and needs.

The label 'autism' may imply a uniformity which belies the variations in the individual manifestations of the condition, and the huge differences in

strategies best able to deal with it.

We should not assume that there is a single approach to assisting all autistic students.

### **Individual differences and providing tailored support**

The apparent heterogeneity is due to a number of factors such as:

- variability in the severity of the core symptoms
- individual differences in intellectual ability (some students may be gifted)
- diagnosis at different stages of development (some in preschool or school or even in the tertiary setting)
- different interventions and supports prior to entering or university
- varied levels and types of support from family (the majority are likely to still be living at home)
- co-morbid psychological disorders (many have anxiety or depression)
- differing biological bases for the presenting condition.

Staff should be aware of the diversity in presentation of autism among

affected students. The support needs of these students are thus often complex and highly idiosyncratic and may be at odds with the student's apparent capability.

Therefore, a tailored approach that specifically targets the particular issues faced by each autistic student is necessary.

## **Strategies for staff**

This section contains a collection of issues that staff may encounter in supporting autistic students, and some strategies to assist.

### **Regular contact**

Initiating and maintaining regular contact with an autistic student can be extremely helpful. Sometimes a student will approach only a familiar member of staff, rather than the relevant teaching staff for a particular subject or course.

If you are a teacher and you find there is an autistic student in your class, it is advisable to arrange a meeting with the student. This will allow you to get to know the student and vice versa, and help you to understand the student's needs and arrange potential

support strategies.

### **Be explicit in communication**

Autistic individuals have the tendency to interpret literally what other people say. Hence it will be very helpful to autistic students if all communication (both oral and written) is clear and concise, using unambiguous language.

Care should be taken in the use of figurative language which might be taken literally, such as irony, metaphor or hyperbole. This will not only improve communications with your autistic students, but also international students, students with specific learning difficulties, and students with mental health conditions.

Make sure instructions do not use unnecessarily obscure language and explicitly tell students to come back to you if they have any concerns or questions.

Assignment specifications, exam questions, and instructions should also be clear and unambiguous, with the opportunity to clarify with you or an invigilator explicitly stated at the outset.

## No surprises and planning ahead

Many autistic individuals prefer to follow routines and do not like surprises. A sudden unexpected change in a schedule may cause anxiety. It will be beneficial for students when you can plan ahead and give warnings to students ahead of time when plans change. These strategies will benefit other students as well.

Examples might be:

- providing the class with course information prior to the first day of class; providing online lecture/class material a few days prior to class
- a clear statement of assessment procedures at the beginning of the course or unit
- notifying students well ahead of time of any room/time changes.

## Disruptive behaviour

An autistic student in your class may display unusual behaviour, such as making disruptive noises or asking an unreasonable number of questions. If the student's behaviour affects other students and disturbs the class, you may want to speak to someone from the disability/accessibility support service in your institution and they may be able to work on the issue with the student and

yourself.

## Absenteeism

Monitoring the class attendance of any known autistic student may permit effective corrective action in a timely manner. There may be various reasons for absenteeism. Some may be very easily resolved, e.g., student not being able to find the classroom, or student unaware of attendance requirements. Others may be more difficult to deal with, for instance an autistic student experiencing high anxiety, or being unable to cope due to feelings of being overwhelmed, etc. In these circumstances, it is best to contact someone from the disability/accessibility support service who may help determine the cause of the absenteeism, directly support the student and make specific remedial suggestions to you.

## Assessments and coursework

Many autistic students find it difficult to hand in coursework on time and this may have negative consequences if it is not recognised early enough. There may be numerous factors which cause late submission of coursework. These may include the fact that the student:

- is unsure how to start the work and does not understand the questions
- is overwhelmed by the work and hence does not attempt to start the work
- cannot get the coursework to the quality that meets their expectation
- has completed the assessment work-however the assessment instructions did not explicitly state to hand in the work, where to submit etc.; hence the student does not hand it in on time

There are a few things that can be done to address these issues:

- Make sure coursework instructions are clear and unambiguous.
- Ensure all assessment requirements are listed at the commencement of study.
- Ensure that the autistic student is fully briefed.
- Act as soon as deadlines are missed; this could involve speaking to the student or contacting the student's disability/accessibility support liaison officer.
- Find out why the student is missing deadlines.

While some of these issues are easy to tackle, the disability/accessibility support liaison officer may be able to help with the more difficult ones.

### Exams

Enabling students with disabilities to demonstrate their knowledge and abilities in an exam environment can be a complex issue.

Some autistic students find exams extremely challenging. Again, similar to the late submission of coursework, there may be numerous factors which make exams unfairly demanding for autistic students, including:

- slow handwriting
- misunderstandings and problems interpreting the exam questions
- distractions during examination, e.g., surrounding noises
- fears and anxieties making examinations unreasonably stressful.

In many circumstances, reasonable adjustments can be made to the exam environment and content. Please read about reasonable adjustments to see examples of possible adjustments that have been suggested or put into practice.

## Group work

Many autistic students find group work extremely challenging due to their difficulties in communication and social skills.

Students may experience real anxiety about having to work within a group, particularly when working with previously unknown students.

If it is possible, it will be helpful to assign one or two familiar faces to the autistic student's group. If this is not possible, it may be useful to consider assigning specific roles or tasks to group members so that the autistic student knows exactly what is expected of them.

## Tutorials

Make sure tutors are aware of which students in the class are autistic (if allowed under your disability agreement with the student).

It may be a good idea to personally introduce the relevant staff member to the student and encourage them to become familiar with the student.

## Seek help

If you have not already done so, it will be worthwhile identifying the point-of-contact at your tertiary institute who is

responsible for providing assistance for autistic students. This person could be a disability support liaison officer or someone from the student support services.

## Reasonable adjustments

### Disability Discrimination Act 1992

The Disability Standards for Education (2005) were formulated under the Disability Discrimination Act (1992).

The Standard states the obligations of education and training providers to ensure that students with disabilities are able to access and participate in education and training on the same basis as those without disability.

The Standards provide for reasonable adjustments and alternative assessment arrangements to allow students with disabilities equal access to academic courses and activities.

### Providing reasonable adjustments

A **reasonable adjustment** is a measure or action which enables a student with a disability to participate in education and training on the same basis as other students.

An **alternative assessment** is an adjustment or alteration to the standard format of an assessment. 13

If you have not already done so, please check with the disability support service at your institution for the types of adjustments that may be provided to students with disabilities, as this may differ between institutions.

While some autistic students may independently initiate discussions with academic staff, the disability support liaison officers may attend the meeting with academic staff to facilitate discussion of appropriate adjustments for the particular student. In some cases disability support may send you a letter stating what reasonable adjustments the student requires.

Many lectures in tertiary settings are now automatically recorded and placed online. It may be helpful to make sure that autistic students are aware of this and are able to access this information independently. A Faculty Fact Sheet is available on Rochester Institute of Technology's Spectrum Program website.



# DISABILITY/ ACCESSIBILITY SUPPORT SERVICES

## Key Points

**1** If a student has disclosed their condition with the university, staff members should be notified by the disability/accessibility support staff that the student has a disability. However, the disability/accessibility staff may not be able to tell you the actual condition, depending on the wishes of the student.

**2** Once you have been notified that the student is neurodiverse, it may be a good idea to have a one-on-one meeting with the student. This will give the student the opportunity to tell you their needs and help you provide appropriate support.

The disability/accessibility support staff at your institution should contact you when you have a student with a disability enrolled in the course you are teaching. They may or may not be able to notify you of the specific diagnosis, as this will depend on the regulations of your institution and whether or not the student has given permission for their disability to be disclosed.

### Meeting the student

Once you have been notified about the student's disability, it is worthwhile setting up a meeting with your student to discuss the student's specific support needs so that you and the disability/accessibility support staff can provide tailored support. If you do not know what disability the student has, the student may be willing to disclose this to you in order for you to provide more individually tailored assistance.



# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

## Books

Jamieson, J., & Jamieson, C. (2004). *Managing Asperger Syndrome at College and University: A resource for students, tutors and support services*. Great Britain: David Fulton Publishers

Wolf, L.E., Brown, J.T., & Bork, G.R. (2009). *Students with Asperger Syndrome: A guide for college personnel*. Shawnee Mission, KS: AAPC

## Video

Organization for Autism Research. (2010). *Understanding Asperger Syndrome: A Professor's Guide*. [Retrieved 26 June 2012]

## Online training

There are three e-learning modules: Building awareness of adults autism, Supporting adults with autism, and Working with adults with autism. You will need to sign-up to the British Psychological Society to access the e-learning modules.

## Websites

Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training. [7 April 2016]

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Trinity College Dublin. (2011). Autism spectrum disorder. [Retrieved 26 June 2012]

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University of Melbourne. Student Equity and Disability Support: Asperger's Syndrome [Retrieved 15 April 2016]

NOTE: A few of these resources were written in other countries and some of the content in these resources may not be applicable for university students in Australia e.g. legislation and tertiary education system.

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