Guidelines for Named Contacts for students with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASDs)

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If you require this document in an alternative format please contact Gael Campbell on 0131 650 9163 or email: gael.campbell@ed.ac.uk

Guidelines for Named Contacts

The School is asked to name a suitable person from the School to take on this role. This could be the personal tutor, a student support officer or another person in the School who is in a position to advise the student on academic matters, and to check in regularly with the student to discuss progress on the course and ensure the student is on track.

Please notify the Student Disability Service of the name of the named contact once appointed. This is vital, as we need to know who to contact if necessary. This will then be recorded in the student’s file. Please email: disability.service@ed.ac.uk

Student Disability Service
The University of Edinburgh
Third Floor, The Main Library Building
George Square
Edinburgh
EH8 9LJ
Tel: 0131 650 6828

Background information on Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) –
Students with ASDs are often some of the brightest students at university, yet can experience a variety of barriers affecting their progression. Many students with ASDs prefer the label ‘Asperger’s Syndrome’ (AS) or ‘High Functioning Autism’ (HFA) although these terms are no longer used in the medical classifications. Therefore we continue to use the term Asperger’s Syndrome (AS) on our learning profiles.

The difficulties that students with AS can experience overlap with many of the other more familiar “specific learning difficulties”. However, an Autistic Spectrum Disorder is a highly individual condition or spectrum, and therefore any supports need to be carefully coordinated. It should be kept in mind that life can be particularly hard for people with AS, as the condition affects every aspect of their lives, many people with AS lack any filters and life can be exhausting – often resulting in anxiety and depression.

Each person with AS is a unique individual and the key to supporting these students is to find out how best to reduce the impact of difficulties for each individual by asking the student and by using direct, plain language (avoiding metaphors) and giving very clear instructions backed up in writing.
What are the difficulties or issues students with AS may experience?

- **Concentration issues** - where they either “hyper focus” on an activity or subject area and can’t move on to a new one, or struggle to concentrate at all at other times. Hyper focus can be useful but can also be problematic.

- **Coordination difficulties** - affecting handwriting/fine motor skills or gross motor skills and may seem awkward in their movements

- **Organisational difficulties** - making it much harder to be in the right place at the appointed time, with the relevant materials

Some additional issues affecting students with AS can include:

- **Communication/social interaction**
  - can find it especially difficult to initiate social contact or may misinterpret communication with others
  - forget or avoid eye contact during conversations
  - some may find it difficult to empathise or at least to imagine what others may be thinking or feeling – and can cause difficulties when working with others or in group work
  - may come across as particularly rigid or fixed in their approaches to things and may not easily take on new ways of doing things or of thinking about things

- **Emotional expression**
  - both verbal and body language or facial expression may be limited
  - may display very literal thinking
  - it can be hard to read any non-verbal cues or communication and may not understand sarcasm, causing frequent misunderstandings and affecting social and written interactions.
  - it can also be hard to detect levels of anxiety, as may not be able to express it as such

- **Rigidity of thought**
  - may be apparent in lectures and tutorial groups, for instance, where people with AS often struggle with the social dynamic and may talk too much or too little, or may speak out of turn
  - preference for fixed routines/difficulty coping with change

- **Sensory sensitivities**
  - people with AS can be either over or under sensitive to temperature, smells, light, sounds and textures. For those students affected, this can be a source of sometimes extreme discomfort and/or distraction and may affect attendance.
### The role of the “Named Contact”:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role of the Named Contact</th>
<th>Why is this important?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>To act as part of the team within the institution, helping to keep the student on track with their studies.</strong></td>
<td>Regular liaison with staff of the Student Disability Service will help the Named Contact manage any issues or concerns arising if they are uncertain of appropriate actions to take. Practical help with understanding of course requirements and university routines is vital.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>To contact the student regularly – by email, or in person, weekly, or at least monthly, as agreed with the student.</strong></td>
<td>Due to difficulties outlined above, students find it especially difficult to initiate social contact of any kind. They may also not reveal that they are struggling until the end of the year. Therefore regular contact can be vital in helping to reduce anxiety and ensure that the student stays on track with their studies.</td>
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<td><strong>To listen to the student’s concerns non-judgementally and respond appropriately.</strong></td>
<td>Apparently trivial matters can be a source of concern and confusion at times. Offering reassurance or directing students to further supports can be vital.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>To use closed questioning and unambiguous language to ascertain how a student might be managing coursework and deadlines.</strong></td>
<td>Due to the difficulties with social communication and tendency to take things literally, students may not express themselves well. Probing questions, asking for details about how they are coping are likely to yield more accurate information! Avoid metaphors, avoid non verbal communication.</td>
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<td><strong>To remind the students that it is normal to feel confused or overwhelmed at times.</strong></td>
<td>Perfectionist tendencies are common in this student group. Reminders that ALL new students feel worried or concerned at times can be helpful.</td>
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<td><strong>To provide support reliably, as agreed.</strong></td>
<td>Due to concerns regarding social interaction and negative prior experiences, the importance of following up actions within agreed timescales is important. It is very useful to establish the best mode of contact for the student – e.g. by phone or email? And to back up any meetings with a written outline summarising the outcomes/actions/instructions etc.</td>
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<td><strong>To give some assistance with organisational skills and reminders of deadlines.</strong></td>
<td>If the difficulties are thought to be significant, further study skills support can be arranged through the Student Disability Service to help the student improve their skills in this area.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>To act as a familiar point of contact to whom the student can turn regarding course related concerns.</strong></td>
<td>This may mean clarifying questions regarding study expectations, wording of an assignment, management of group work, anxiety about fieldwork, practicalities regarding exam arrangements.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>To liaise with other academic staff, as necessary</strong></td>
<td>To help reduce sources of confusion and improve communication – multiple meetings with multiple people are very stressful for these students.</td>
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</table>
To manage personal boundaries and signpost the students to other sources of support, as required.

Staff should not feel overburdened by their interactions with students and further supports are available. The Student Disability Service advisors and the SDS website are useful sources of information in this regard.

To help monitor stress levels during the year.

Students with Asperger Syndrome may not demonstrate obvious signs of stress but changes in behaviour may be noted and further advice sought within the university.

In terms of personal qualities, ideally someone:

- who is non-judgemental in their attitude
- has an awareness of disability related issues, ideally Asperger Syndrome, or is willing to learn more about it.
- who is calm and patient, but can also be firm. These students can be very direct in their communication and need to be given clear guidance at times about what is considered appropriate.
- to not take what may seem like rudeness or strange behaviour at face value – it is likely that the person’s intention is not to cause upset
- who is aware of managing boundaries and signposting students for other supports. The idea is NOT to overburden one individual unnecessarily, but to recommend other support as and when required. That said, a reduced mentoring load is often suggested as good practice to allow for the more regular contact and liaison work.

Is training required to be effective in this role?

- Being open minded and patient is just as important as awareness of Asperger Syndrome.
- The Student Disability Service is happy to be contacted to discuss any concerns and offer guidance as required.
- Training can also be offered by the Student Disability Service.
- There is excellent information online e.g.

https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/supporting_students_aspergers_syndrome_rpg.pdf