

Strategies to support students with autism in further education

This information sheet is designed to provide strategies for staff and students who are attending college or university with a person with autism.

Before the student with autism starts college or university

- Talk to the student and to parents/carers about how autism affects them and what support they might need.
- Encourage them to visit the college or university disability services to access more support.
- Try to understand the condition and accept the student as they are.
- If the student with autism has agreed to disclose their condition, ensure that people who will have contact with the student with autism, understand autism.
- If possible, use support staff to assist the learning process and give emotional support.

Tips for the lecturer

- Agree with the student what is expected of them in the way of attendance, work etc.
- When instructions are given to a whole group, some students with autism may not know that they are included in this group. In this case, you will need to address them by name to give them instructions.
- Try to use specific language. Elaborate language may confuse the student and they may interpret what is said literally. Explain idioms and unspoken assumptions.
- Some students may not transfer skills from one area to another. Each class may appear separate from the others with its own requirements for attention and activity which have to be learned.
- Some students with autism may not know when it is appropriate to participate and when it is not appropriate. Establish class rules about participation and be firm without being aggressive.
- Establish what happens if the student is having difficulty. They may need somewhere they can go to cool off if a situation becomes too stressful.

Tips for support staff

- When the student first enrolls, ensure they know their way around college, have understood the timetable and have met the staff who will teach them.
- If there has to be a change of routine or staffing, give them as much notice as possible.
- If there is a last minute change, explain this individually to the student.
- Make arrangements as necessary for the student during 'free time' (including coffee and dinner breaks) as the lack of structure during these periods may cause stress and anxiety.
- If they have to bring books/materials to class help them to put in place strategies to remember them (like a checklist or a reminder on their phone).

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Tutorial support

Tutorial support provides an opportunity for dialogue between a student and a member of staff where learning requirements can be identified and planned. The student will be encouraged to recognise their learning strengths and learning needs, and asked to create and direct future tasks, projects and assignments.

When organising a tutorial, think of the following:

- Is the process student-centred?
- How can communication be made more effective?
- How is the agenda set? Is this empowering for the student?
- How are the abstract concepts of reflection, evaluation and forward planning managed?
- How can the process be kept alive through the week until the next tutorial?

Setting up the tutorial:

- Let the student know when and where the tutorial will take place. Try to choose somewhere familiar, comfortable, quiet and distraction free.
- Keep to the same time and day each week, and use an appointment card or another visual stimulus to act as a reminder.
- Make it clear what the student is expected to do at the end of the tutorial time.
- The structure of the tutorial will depend on each student. Be aware of the individual strengths and weaknesses of your student. They may have good vocabulary and expressive skills but still have difficulty in understanding language and social behaviour.
- Some students will need support organising their work and tasks for the week, knowing where they should be, what they should be doing socially and what to do when they need to ask for help.

Keeping in touch

A good way of keeping in touch with students may be via email or text messaging rather than phone calls. This is because students with autism are often very computer literate and prefer visual ways of communicating rather than verbal. Changes of lesson time, location, timing or staffing could be given via the computer or the mobile phone, and reminders could be initiated for important deadlines such as essay hand-in dates.

Useful resources

www.autism-uni.org – The autism & uni project