

Disability and Dyslexia Service (DDS)

Advice for teaching students with autism: possible challenges of online teaching during Covid-19

What is autism?

Autism (also known as Autistic Spectrum Conditions) refers to a lifelong developmental disability that affects the way a person communicates and relates to people around them.

Interaction with others can be difficult for autistic people and they can experience high levels of stress and anxiety on a daily basis. The condition affects people in different ways, but everyone with autism shares a difficulty in making sense of the world.

People with autism tend to face difficulties with:

- **Social communication** - e.g. difficulty making small talk; literal understanding of spoken language; lack of understanding of body language
- **Social relationships** – e.g. don't pick up on unwritten social rules; may say inappropriate things; avoid eye contact; find group environments very uncomfortable
- **Imaginative or flexible thinking** – difficulty predicting what will or could happen next; difficulty knowing what others are thinking; a strong preference for familiarity and routine and anxiety when things do not go to plan; may become very focussed on one point of interest, at the expense of the bigger picture.

Considerations for students with autism as we move to online teaching

The current Covid-19 situation is forcing us to all adapt to new ways of working and studying. This is stressful for everyone, but may present some additional challenges for students with autism.

The following are some possible challenges, though this list is not exhaustive. Students with autism may face difficulty with:

- Dealing with unexpected or last minute changes, such as moving to online teaching generally, as well as unexpected changes to timetables or assessments;
- The lack of routine or structured time each day;
- Ambiguity about what is expected of them (e.g. if they are given 48 hours to complete an open-book exam, please specify how long they are expected to write i.e. 3-4 hours, not all 48 hours);

- Anxiety using video/audio conferencing in front of their teaching staff and/or peers. Many autistic students have told DDS they dislike speaking on the phone and feel uncomfortable posting comments to online forums/discussion boards where their peers can see their comments;
- Existing general anxiety is likely to be heightened, making it harder to concentrate on learning;
- Increased isolation (e.g. may not have many networks of friends for support or social communication);
- May get 'lost' in reading about other things, e.g. a specific topic of interest, at the expense of wider teaching material.

What can help?

If you teach any students with autism (they should have a Student Support Summary from DDS), please be aware that they may need more regular catch-ups or reviews than some of their peers. If you are able to offer some additional contact time, this would be valuable to check:

- that they know what to focus on;
- that they are clear what is expected from them in terms of assignments (e.g. wording of the question is not ambiguous, they are clear how long to spend on it etc)
- how they are doing generally, and signposting to support services (DDS, Advice and Counselling) as needed.

Additional guidance on teaching autistic students can be found at:

<http://www.dds.qmul.ac.uk/asd/>

<http://www.dds.qmul.ac.uk/staffinfo/>

Best practice guides from Autism&uni are available to download from <http://www.autism-uni.org/bestpractice/>

For more information or specific queries, please contact Melanie Dupin in the Disability and Dyslexia Service on dds@qmul.ac.uk