

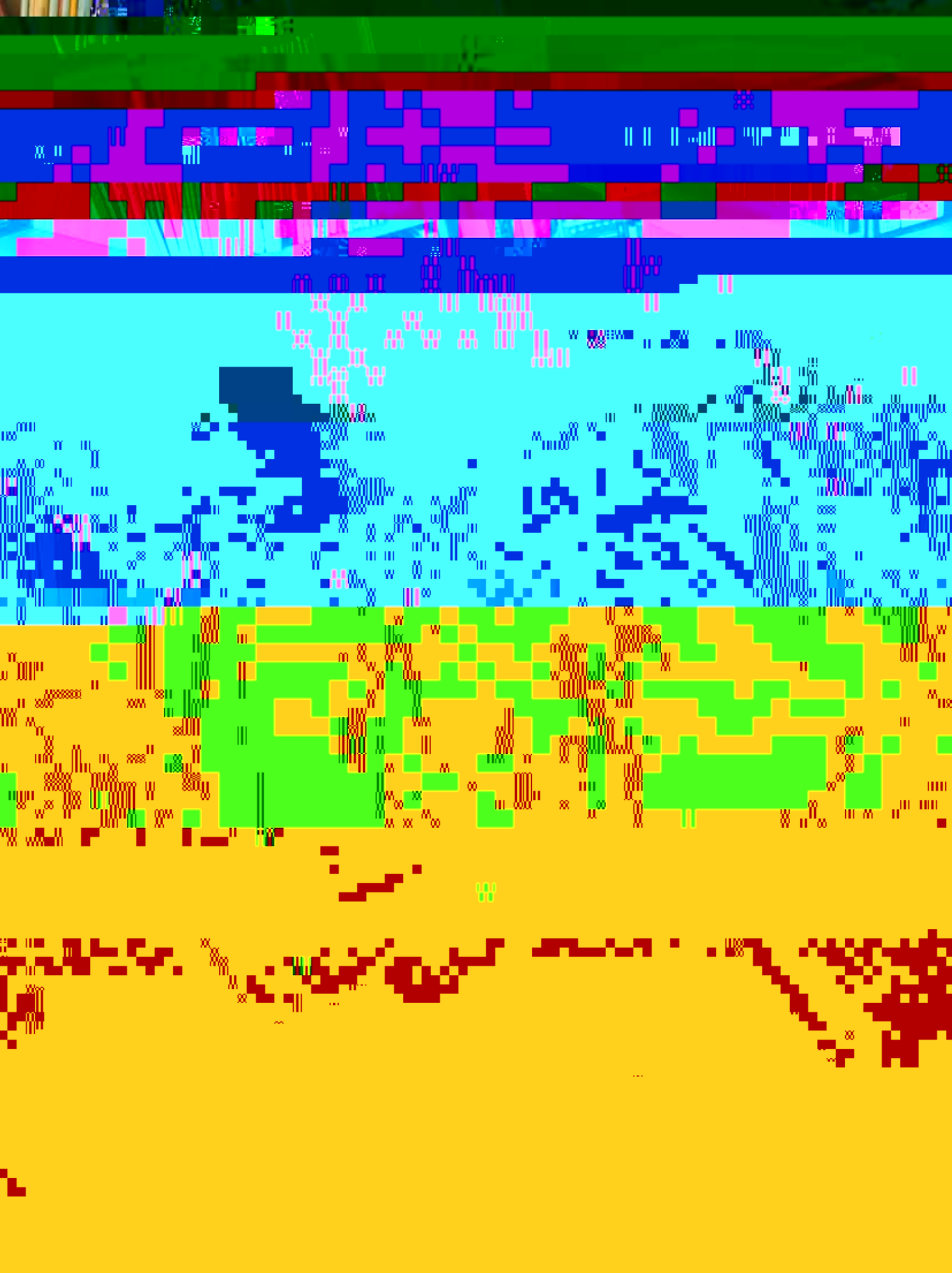



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These guidelines were initially prepared as a resource for newly appointed student mentors supporting students with autism and Asperger syndrome at the University of Strathclyde.

This guide has been rewritten as a useful resource for any university employing and training its own student mentors, or considering doing so. Readers may reproduce the guidelines, or relevant sections of the guidelines, as long as they acknowledge the source.

This new version was made possible by a grant from the Scottish Funding Council in 2009, which has supported not only this publication, but also a research project (led by Charlene Tait of the National Centre for Autism Studies, University of Strathclyde) into transition and retention for students on the autism spectrum, and the delivery of a series of workshops on this topic (jointly delivered by the University of Strathclyde and The National Autistic Society Scotland).

We wish to extend particular thanks to the student mentors at the University of Strathclyde, whose direct and practical experience has provided valuable tips and strategies, examples of which are given throughout this guide. Thanks also to Charlene Tait (our critical friend) for her feedback on the initial draft version.

Thanks also to Dr Christine Sinclair of the Centre for Academic Practice and Learning Enhancement, University of Strathclyde, who has kindly allowed us to reproduce a selection of her study strategy handouts in the Useful Resources section.

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anxious, they might also avoid it in order to reduce the emotional and physical symptoms of anxiety.

People with AS may:

- appear aloof and uninterested
- be unable to understand social rules (eg standing too close, inappropriate greeting or choice of conversation)
- develop rule-bound behaviour and inflexible routines, which can inhibit social development
- find it difficult to understand turn-taking and group work
- not understand the concept of relationships and friendship in the same way as other people.

Students with AS respond well to a study routine, but may struggle with unexpected changes to timetables, topics, rooms, deadlines etc. Some

tutorials, either by under-contributing or contributing too much (eg dominating discussion or asking too many questions). Students seeking friendship may misinterpret casual interactions or gestures as indicative of genuine friendship.

Social imagination

imagination would be highly misleading – in fact, many people with AS have extremely creative imaginations. It is perhaps better to describe this as *flexibility of thought*. People with AS tend to be rigid thinkers and cannot always conceive of hypothetical situations or empathise with another person's point of view.

Students with AS may, for example, experience the following difficulties.

- Adapting to changes of routine, such as the transition from school to university or between semester time and the lengthy university holidays.
- Dealing with frequent changes of topic, and following multiple concurrent subjects. People with AS tend not to be able to multi-task, and find it difficult to shift attention readily between subjects and tasks.
- Working in groups that don't follow rule-bound behaviour. People with AS may become anxious when other students miss agreed deadlines or fail to show up at agreed times.

Special interests and obsessions are also a feature of AS. Where a special interest is compatible with the student's subject choice, it can be a positive aid to learning (eg a Computer Science degree student who has a passionate interest in computer programming). However, special interests can also be a barrier to learning when compulsory subjects of study fall outside that narrow frame of interest. A student with AS may actively pursue their interest at the expense of other required tasks and study priorities (eg by staying up all night developing a computer game).

Psychological theories

A number of theories have been developed to

AS. As theories, they are all subject to academic debate, but can help you as a mentor to understand how a student with AS may experience the world around them.



Good communication skills and an ability to reflect

A good mentor will always have strong communication skills. It's not just a matter of having a warm personality (although that will certainly help); it's also about your ability to actively listen, to communicate clearly (avoiding the abstract and hypothetical) and to offer advice and guidance in a way that is direct but not disempowering or patronising to the student.

It may take a few months to develop these skills, but it is worth the effort.

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Figure 1: Sample mentoring agreement

<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Meet the student at agreed times and locations.2. Advise the student by email/text of any unavoidable changes to arrangements at least 24 hours in advance.3. Keep a record of work done and issues arising, which can be referred to in review meetings with the Disability Service4. Communicate with the student in clear and specific terms, providing written instruction as a back up where appropriate (eg in tasks the student may be required to complete in their own time).5. Attend regular meetings and training, as required by the Disability Service.6. Any other support consistent with the defined role of student mentor.	
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Meet your mentor at agreed times and locations.2. Advise your mentor by email of any unavoidable changes to arrangements at least 24 hours in advance.3. Attend review meetings with the Disability Service when requested.4. Communicate any concerns or difficulties in working with your mentor to your Disability Adviser.	Student mentor

The Mentoring Agreement helps clarify your respective roles, but also helps to clarify the nature of your relationship from the outset. The student knows what



Planning your meetings

Why are we meeting?

If you don't have a clear purpose for meeting, this is a fair question for the student to ask - especially as they already have a busy timetable.

It is therefore helpful to establish a structure and agenda in advance of your meetings.

Structure

to your meetings with the student, you will both be clearer about what to expect, and will probably both

provoke less anxiety.

Establishing a structure doesn't mean you have

manage both your expectations about what can realistically be covered during the available time. It will also give your meetings a familiarity through routine, which can be reassuring and helpful to the student.

Student mentor

Agenda

It is always helpful for the mentor and the student to agree an agenda, or at least the purpose of the meeting, in advance. If the student is able to identify which issues you might be able to help them with, and which of these are priorities, then agreeing an agenda will be easy. However, many students with

student in this process.



Student mentor

Agreeing a list of potential extra topics to work on can help to make sure that your meetings remain productive and worthwhile for the student. This

employment, independent living skills and planning for leaving home, as well as looking into student clubs and societies, etc. Try to avoid putting exact dates on when these additional topics will be covered, as the schedule may have to change due to other more urgent issues arising in the mean time.

Where should we meet?

If you fail to identify a suitable venue in advance of your meeting, this can have a disruptive effect on your ability to deliver support.

Student with Asperger syndrome

Some students will have a preference for meeting in the same place every week. For others, it might be helpful to suggest a change of venue from time to time.

When should we meet?

The Mentoring Agreement will always include guidance on the frequency of your meetings. During transitions, it is possible that you will need to meet on a daily basis. Once patterns and routines have been established, weekly or twice weekly meetings might be more effective. As with all forms of study support, there is a general expectation that the amount of support a student requires from their mentor will decrease over time as they become more

When you agree a suitable time to meet, you should also take account of:

the student's timetable and other fixed commitments. If your meetings are going to be taken up with focussed work on study skills,

then it's probably not sensible to plan these meetings for 4-5pm in the afternoon, after a full day of lectures.

potential restrictions related directly or indirectly to the impact of the student's disability. For example, inflexible transport arrangements (some students with AS may have difficulty using busy public transport at peak times due to anxiety), commitments to external support services, increased difficulties at particular times of day due to disturbed sleep patterns etc. the need for any student to have sufficient rest breaks and time set aside for lunch in their timetable.

When deciding on a time and place to meet, it will be easier to give consideration to all these factors if you look over the student's timetable together.

Student mentor





...consider issues around disclosure and confidentiality

When a mentor is matched to a student, a certain amount of information regarding the nature and impact of the student's unseen disability is usually communicated by the Disability Service. This information is on a 'need to know' basis, and will have relevance to the way that you offer support, and the particular study-related issues that you prioritise in your meetings with the student.

Students with AS have a legal entitlement to a degree

any information that you are given (directly or via the Disability Service) about the student in the course of your employment as sensitive personal data, and should not share this with your friends or any third party, including lecturers or the student's parents, without the student's consent. It is crucial to establish boundaries and guidelines about this with the student. For example, you should make them aware that in some instances they may disclose information to you that you will have to pass on to relevant third parties, such as your manager.

It is up to each individual student whether they wish to disclose an unseen disability, such as AS, and to whom.

Student with Asperger syndrome

Student with Asperger syndrome

The Disability Service will typically communicate information about a disabled student's academic needs to their academic departments. This record

may simply relate the possible impacts of a disclosed disability on study.

So, there are potentially both positive and negative aspects to disclosure. If a student you are working with is considering disclosure (eg to their lecturers,

worthwhile exploring these pros and cons with them.

...make decisions or move on

Helping a student to tackle their own procrastination and get things done has, on occasions, been one of the biggest challenges for mentors. Simply creating an action point and getting the student to put a particular study task in their diary may not be enough.

Their inability to complete a task may be due to an underlying reason, which may not be immediately apparent and which the student may or may not be able to articulate.

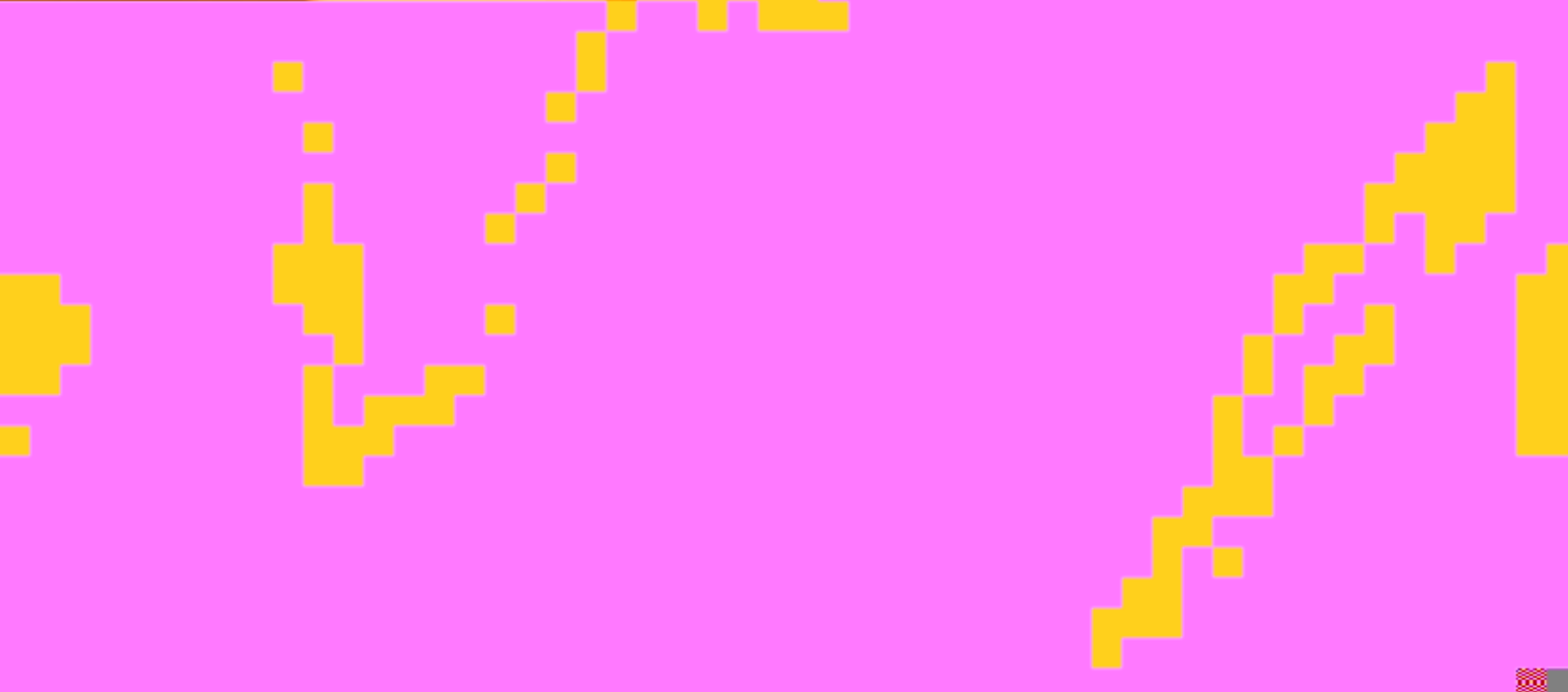
get something done include:

a lack of interest or connection with the material or topic. It may be that the subject material falls outside the student's special interests. Students with AS will generally find it difficult to motivate themselves to focus on a study task if they are not interested in the subject.

a lack of confidence, or a difficulty in interpreting either the material or the task they are being asked to complete. It may be that the manner in which the material has been presented or the class has been delivered has been off-putting or difficult to follow. a failure to see the point or purpose of the exercise.

Students will at times be required to complete tasks of which the purpose and value may not always be immediately apparent. However, failure to complete the task may lead to a loss of marks or credit for that class.

Get to the root cause of the problem and you will be able to work with the student to identify a strategy for completing the task.



Aspie

An informal term used by some people with Asperger syndrome to refer to themselves.

Asperger syndrome (AS)

An autism spectrum disorder named after the Austrian

the combination of characteristics which were later standardised as diagnostic criteria.

Autism

A developmental disorder affecting social interaction, communication and imagination.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

A term used to describe any diagnosis on the autism spectrum, including Asperger syndrome.

Central coherence

An ability to understand context and 'see the big picture'.

Executive function

in the abstract, and take appropriate action.

Mentoring agreement

A written agreement, usually prepared by a Disability Adviser, which describes the support which the mentor

responsibilities within the mentoring relationship

Needs assessment

An assessment of a disabled student's learning needs, usually conducted by the Disability Service within the student's own university. A needs assessment may identify a need for appropriate study aids and strategies and adjustments to teaching practice and course assessment methods.

Neurotypical (NT)

A term to describe people who are not on the autism spectrum.

Restricted interest

of which is a frequent characteristic of people on the autism spectrum.

Sensory sensitivity

Many people on the autism spectrum report over- or under-sensitivity to sensory stimuli. This is thought to result from a dysfunction in integrating sensory information.



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