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Original Citation

Kelly, Rebecca and Lane, Jackie (2013) Accommodations in assessments for students on the autistic spectrum. In: School of Education and Professional Development Conference, 19 July 2013, 19th July 2013, Huddersfield, UK. (Unpublished)

This version is available at http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/18797/

Accommodations in Assessments for Students on the Autistic Spectrum

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What is Autism?
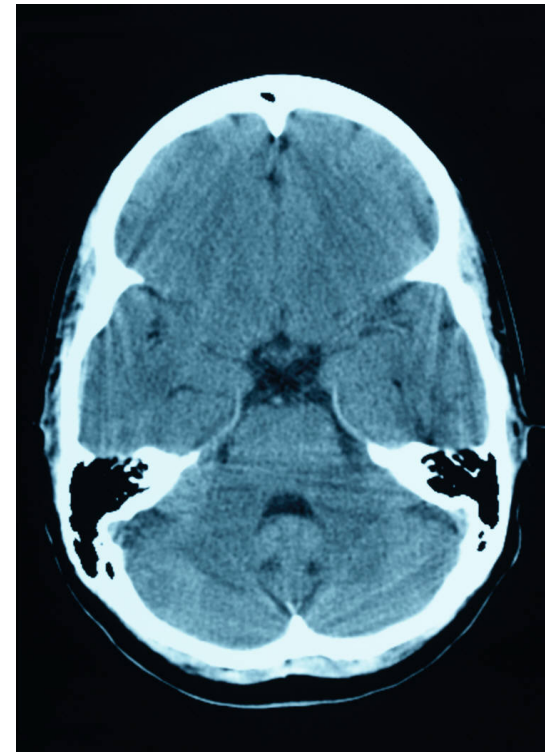
The main features

- High-functioning autism and Asperger syndrome are autism spectrum disorders (ASDs).
- They are characterised by disturbances in:
  - Social interaction
  - Communication, particularly verbal
  - Repetitive and/or restrictive behaviour and interests
  - Difficulty with imagination
  - Possibly hypo-sensitivity to sounds and light

- But they are also characterised by strengths such as:
  - Concentration
  - Precision
  - Attention to detail
  - Honesty
  - Punctuality
  - Reliability
  - Determination
  - May be above average intelligence/gifted

- As a spectrum disorder, symptoms range from mild to extreme. Some with the disorder may never become independent, but many are capable and intelligent.
- So, is there any need to be concerned about current practices?

Why should I be concerned?

Inequality of access to opportunities

- Clinical level ASDs affect an estimated 1% of the population, according to the National Autistic Society.

- Yet those with this disorder are more likely to be unemployed compared with those with other forms of disability .

  - The Department of Work and Pensions calculates 31% of those with a disability other than autism have full time employment in the UK, compared with only 15% of those with an ASD.

The role of educators

- Education is key to changing this trend, but only a small percentage of those with ASD will enter Higher Education (HE).

- Huddersfield University has 61 ASD students, on a variety of UG and PG courses. Arts, Humanities, Science, Nursing etc. – but mostly in Digital Media and Gaming.

- There has been a sharp rise in number of diagnoses of children in the 90s – so expect this to impact very soon on HE.

ASDs as part of the "typical" population

- There is also new evidence that ASD at sub-clinical levels is spread throughout the population.
- So, taking into consideration the needs of those with clinical ASD is likely to be of benefit to all students.

Our legal duties

Discrimination includes

- Direct discrimination.
- Failure to make reasonable adjustments for students (including an anticipatory duty.
- Since the Equality Act 2010, indirect discrimination.
    - Where a provision, criteria or even practice has a disproportionate adverse impact and cannot be justified.
- Harassment.
    - Unwanted conduct that violates a pupil's dignity or creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment.

- Since the EA 2010, discrimination arising from a disability.
  - Unfavourable treatment because of something connected with their disability.
  - Where the education provider or other persons acting on its behalf knows, or could reasonably be expected to know that the person has a disability.
  - You can justify the treatment by showing that is a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim.

A duty from start to finish

- The duty spans from course design and initial publicity and recruitment, through learning and assessment, to the awards ceremony.
  - Indirect discrimination – asking for "dynamic" or "confident" applicants.
  - Harassment – disciplining a student because they do not understand your questions and so you assume they are not paying attention or have not prepared.
  - Discrimination arising from a disability – asking a student to leave a class because they keep asking questions.

Assessment

The importance of assessment

- As the final determiner of competence and grading, assessment is key in accommodating disability.

- The "tradition" of a language orientated approach is no defence against the need to avoid indirect discrimination and to make reasonable adjustments in the modern market.

Thinking ahead

- In a proactive institution, inclusiveness should not only be a consideration in developing a Personal Learning Support Plan after a student reports a disability.

- The overall assessment strategy must build in recognition of a range of skills from the very start.

- This will encourage initial take-up of courses by people with disabilities and also help improve the representation of people from different backgrounds, opening up education for all.

Examinations

Overall considerations

- The first question is whether an exam is necessary to the course.

- If so consider why and whether the assessment criteria are justified and fit with the actual assessment.

  - Are you testing knowledge recall, skills in reading, skills in independent thinking, ability to apply knowledge to new or novel situations, the ability to write a structured response etc.

- If the justification for examining is:
    - that the skills being demonstrated are "desirable" but not "essential", or
    - based on administrative/cost reasons
- then a reasonable adjustment for those with ASD may be replacing the exam with a different form of assessment.
- Even when an exam is required, it can be delivered and designed to reduce the barrier they represent to students with ASD.

Delivery of exams

- Provision of special rooming and equipment and extra time are common accommodations.

- As a centralised process, the impact of such allowances on academics is kept to a minimum.

- But when academic staff are involved, even more can be achieved e.g. practice sessions extra guidance on the meaning of questions.

Structure of exams

- However, delivery can only achieve so much. The structure and format of the assessment itself needs consideration.
- Questions must be:
  - Relevant
  - Unambiguous, and
  - Clear on required outcomes

How to achieve this?

- Questions should be:
    - Broken down into manageable parts with clear allocation of marks. MCQs may be considered.
    - Clear and precise about any facts, so relevant considerations are apparent and in a logical sequence.
    - Where possible, be closed requiring a very specific answer as the student may not have the social imagination skills to give a detailed answer to an open question.
    - Questions should be based on the type of situations students have practiced and on more everyday real occurrences allowing the student to draw on real experience and not on hypothetical situations.
    - An examiner must be aware that the student may interpret questions literally so these should be carefully worded, almost as if speaking to a foreigner.
- Essay question require particular care, the traditional "discuss" approach needs to first identify a practical issue.

Coursework

Coursework

- Again, the outcomes need to be clear.
- The tutor should be available to explain the requirements and any ambiguity within the question.
- Self-directed study is a particular challenge for those with ASD, they need clear direction and time-management prompts.

- Reasonable adjustments could include:
  - A flexible word count.
  - Adaptation of the question to reflect a particular interest of the student.

Presentations
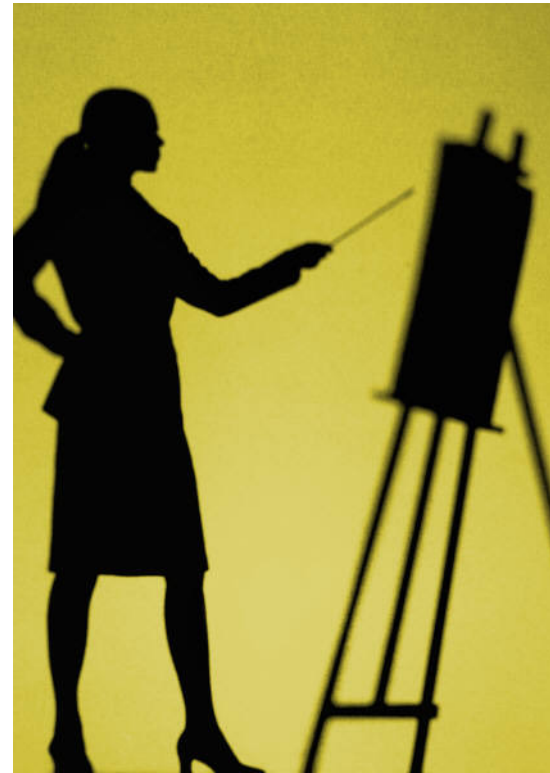
Presentations

- These are increasingly popular as a way of demonstrably improving employability skills, but again it is important to consider exactly why and what you are assessing.

- For example, could you remove 'fluency' or 'clarity of speech' and replace with 'effective communication'?

- Adjustments should be explored:
  - Not making the presentation in front of strangers or large groups.
  - Practice sessions and timings.
  - Allow reading from notes.
  - Do not assess the student on ability to speak in other than a monotone or to maintain eye contact or use body language appropriately.
  - Avoid asking unexpected questions, except as prompts to extract required information as students may be unaware of the need to expand on points.

- Adaption should be the first option, but if the case is serious enough removal.
- There are other ways of demonstrating skills in communicating knowledge, for example preparing a report, and presentations are not an absolutely "essential" skill in many courses.

Group Work

Group work

- This is another useful employability skill, but is again potentially stressful.

- Once more, adaptation is the preferable option e.g. allow the contribution to be made via written communication, set a strictly defined role, allow he person to work with those they are familiar with and careful monitor.

- But total replacement should not be ruled out where it is in the student's best interests.

Practicals
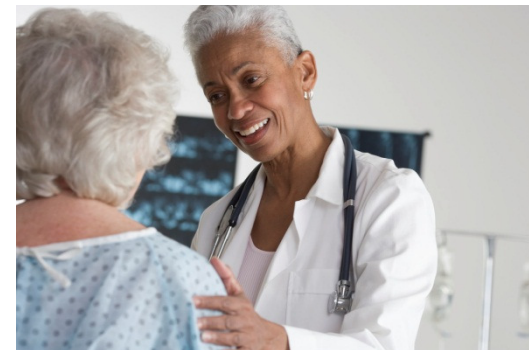
Practicals

- These are clearly important, but care must be taken to once more to be clear about the required outcomes.

- For example, is the requirement to get the necessary information from a patient or is there a need to form a relationship where the patient is put at ease and comfortable to share information.

- Even in the latter case, be careful not to mark down simply for atypical behaviour. If the assumption is made that it is acceptable for the public to find such behaviour discomforting, then no change will ever be possible.

Conclusions

Conclusions

- Inclusiveness should be the starting point in the design of any assessment, rather than an end consideration.

- Where a student has particular needs, flexibility in making adjustment should extend to the assessment itself not just the delivery of it.

- In the end, we are testing for the knowledge and the skills that have been learned.

Final Word

- It is unfair to limit a student's opportunity to show how they have progressed to one particular task.

- This is necessary to some degree for most students as a way of allowing us to assess on a large scale, but for disabled students adjustments can and should be made, and must be proactively offered.