

# A Buddy Scheme - supporting transition and progression for students with Asperger syndrome

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## Background

Students with Asperger's syndrome are more likely to struggle with social and communication skills than the general student population. The impact can be highly stressful and their student experience is often characterised by feelings of isolation and loneliness. These difficulties can impact significantly on peer and tutor interactions, jeopardising individual, group work and placement outcomes.

## Rationale

By developing a Buddy Scheme AS students will gain the opportunity to have social conversations with their non-AS peers in a reliable, empathetic and supportive context with potential for:

- some reduction of general feelings of isolation and loneliness
- some development of specific skills in the art of holding a conversation, thereby enabling each student to make progress towards becoming a more autonomous learner

By developing awareness of Asperger's syndrome, the non-AS Buddies will gain insight and awareness of the difficulties experienced by AS students which will enhance their employability and professional practice.

## Outcomes

All three buddy relationships were successfully maintained during the period of the scheme and all participants kept within the agreed boundaries.

Finishing sentences in the questionnaire, one AS student commented:

The most useful learning experience for me, with regards to the scheme was... *it gave me the opportunity to learn outside my lectures and seminars: understanding social skills; working as a group*

The thing that I feel is most valuable about the Buddy Scheme is ... *helps integrate students with AS into university life*

## Approach

This was an action research project employing an ethnographic methodology.

The content of the scheme was agreed with input from a stakeholder group, chaired by a student with AS and a series of interviews with AS students. Training materials were devised and boundaries identified within which the scheme would operate.

Four AS students and six Buddies were matched into three separate buddy relationships. The buddy meetings took place during the period 18 March to 28 May 2010. Supervision was offered to the Buddies and the AS students were encouraged to discuss any issues which arose with their DSA-funded Mentors if required.

Evaluation comprised three separate questionnaires for the AS students, the buddies and the project team. Two focus groups were held; one for the AS students and one for the buddies.

Comments from the Buddies, when asked what skills they had developed as a result of their participation in the scheme:

*A greater understanding of AS. My interview skills have developed ...*

*Understanding of how non-verbal signals, ie silences can affect someone. This has affected the way I interact in group situations.*

*Empathy & sympathy, time management, communication*

## Evaluation

The complete set of feedback data is not yet available, but preliminary evaluation reveals:

- An overwhelmingly positive perception of the scheme by the AS students.
- AS students did experience some reduction in their feelings of isolation and loneliness.
- Outcomes suggesting greater integration into university life and the development of specific social skills point to progress towards becoming a more autonomous learner.
- The training created and delivered to the Buddies was one of the key factors to the scheme's success.
- Individual supervision to the Buddies was a vital element in the project.

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