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AET Exam accommodations guidance to support students with autism at GCSE

A guide for teachers and examinations
officers entering students into public
examinations in England and Wales

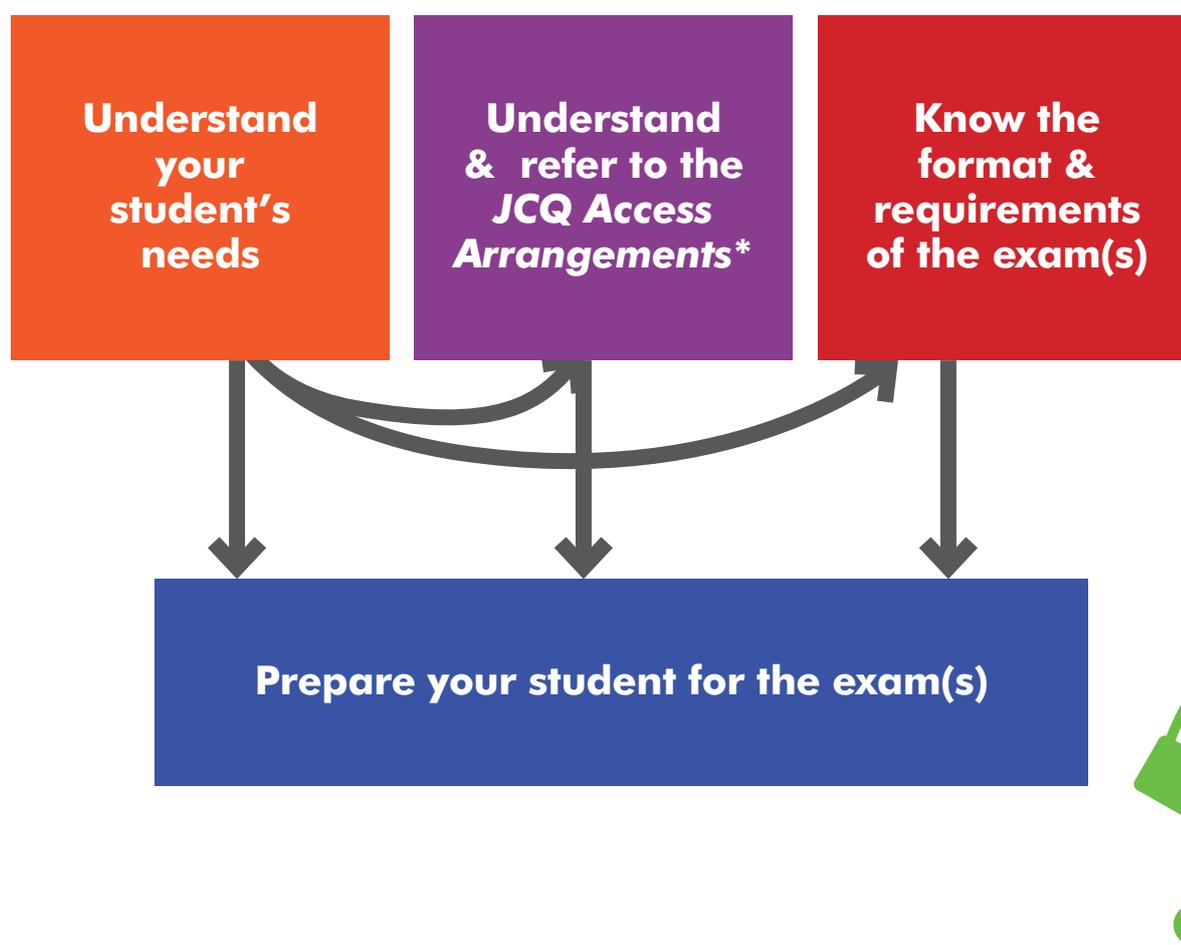


This guide is to help teachers and examination officers plan for and support autistic students when taking public examinations in England and Wales.

Teachers and exam officers can use this guide to review their approach to supporting students and their parents/carers to enable autistic students to demonstrate fully their knowledge and skills in exams.

How to use the guide:

When planning the accommodations that you will need to make in order to prepare your student for their exam(s), the following considerations will need to be made:



* JCQ – Joint Council for Qualifications www.jcq.org.uk

When to use the guide:

You may want to use this exam accommodations guide to plan and review procedures that you have in place to support autistic students when preparing them for public examinations.

This guidance has been written specifically to support autistic students being entered for GCSEs, but the principles and good practice examples can be applied to all public examinations.

Terminology used in this guide:

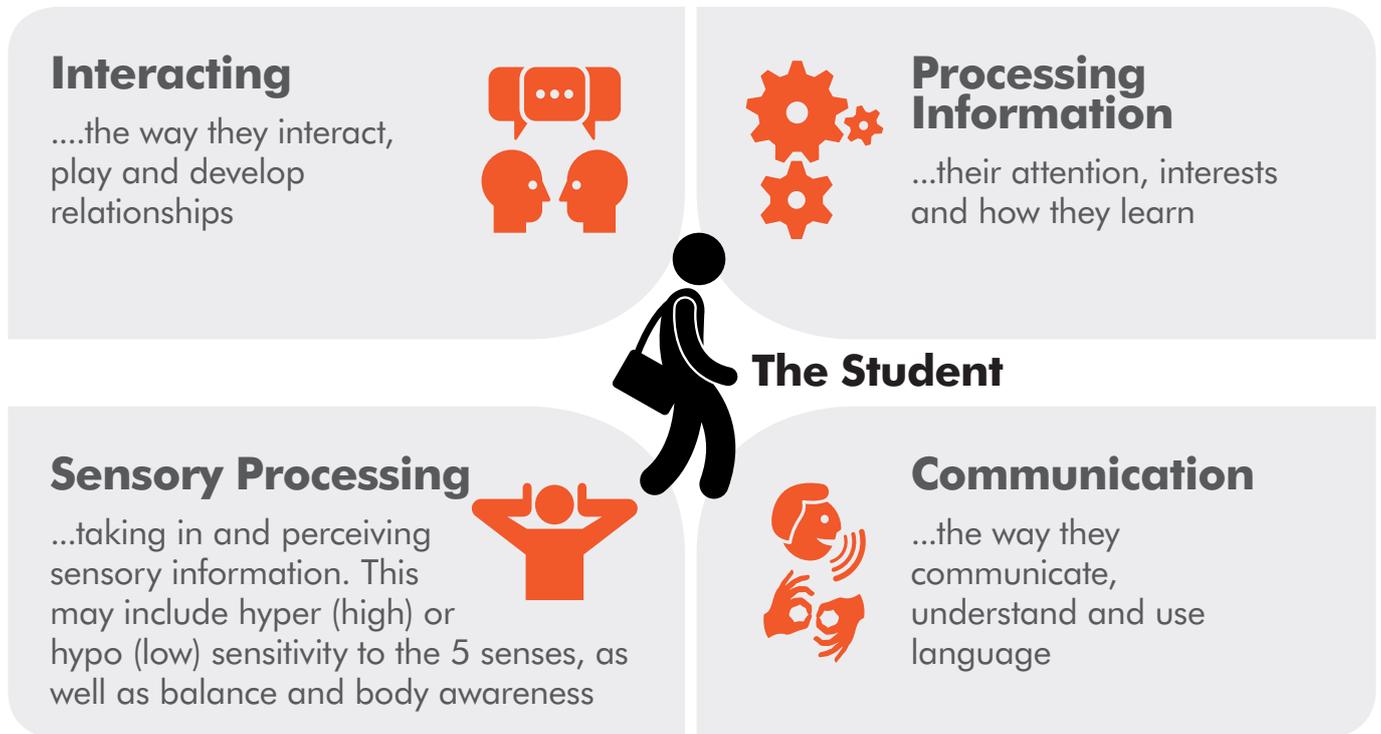
- **Exam accommodations** – in this guide we use ‘exam accommodations’ as an umbrella term referring to all informal preparations and formal JCQ (Joint Council for Qualifications) approved access arrangements made to support autistic students when taking exams.
- **Students with autism** - the descriptors of ‘autistic student’ and ‘autistic students’ will be used within this document to refer to secondary aged students with autism who are preparing to take examinations. The use of the terms Autistic Spectrum Disorder/Condition (ASD/ASC) have been avoided due to the ‘medical model’ connotations associated with these phrases and the offence that they may cause.
- **Teachers** – this guide is aimed at providing guidance for teachers and examination officers. ‘Teachers’ is used as a collective term for any professional working to support autistic students taking examinations. This guidance could also be useful for parents/carers and autistic students themselves in preparing for examinations.
- **Access arrangements** – access arrangements are pre-examination adjustments for students based on evidence of need and normal ways of working. Access arrangements fall into two categories: some arrangements may be put in place by centres, others require prior JCQ awarding body approval in England and Wales. In Northern Ireland there is separate legislation in place, but the definitions and procedures in the JCQ guidance relating to access arrangements and reasonable adjustments apply.
- **Reasonable adjustments** – There is a requirement under the Equality Act 2010 that reasonable adjustments should be made. A reasonable adjustment for a particular person may be unique to that individual and may not be included in the list of available access arrangements. How reasonable the adjustment is will depend on a number of factors including the needs of the disabled candidate/learner. An adjustment may not be considered reasonable if it involves unreasonable costs, timeframes or affects the security or integrity of the assessment.



Understand your student's needs

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people. It also affects how they make sense of the world around them. It is a spectrum condition, which means that, while all people with autism share three main areas of difficulty, their condition will affect them in different ways.

There are four key areas of difference in autism that are particularly important for staff in schools and educational settings to understand because most autistic students will have individual educational needs to be met in these areas.



Understanding the social interactive style and emotional expression of staff and peers

Most autistic students find social interaction with adults and peers effortful. They cannot easily understand commonly used implicit social messages and may find it hard to understand or relate to how social rules change due to context, or what is considered socially 'appropriate' (i.e. what is appropriate to say and do in some situations is inappropriate in other situations). It is difficult for autistic students to read easily and quickly and to understand the emotional intentions of staff and peers. It is important to remember that this can be a 'two-way' difficulty; the actions of autistic students are often misinterpreted as intentionally insensitive or defiant.

This may affect students in exam situations when responding to instructions during an exam from an invigilator or understanding colloquialisms and hidden and subtle meanings within exam questions. It may also affect how they answer certain exam questions that require a response that involves inference and empathy.

Differences in how information is processed

Autistic students have an uneven profile of abilities, which can also coincide with other factors such as age, personality, or the existence of other developmental differences or impairments. It is therefore of paramount importance to assess each student as an individual to gain an overall profile of their strengths and needs.

Differences in how information is processed may make it difficult for a student to answer exam questions that involve understanding another person's perspective or responding to a question that is presented in a different context to how they have been taught about a concept.

Differences in the way sensory information is processed

Many autistic students are under-sensitive or oversensitive to particular sensory stimuli such as sights, sounds and smells. They may also be overwhelmed as they have problems in separating out sensory information and attending to the most relevant. This can cause high levels of anxiety and staff can do a great deal to reduce this by finding out what each student finds hard and creating a classroom and school environment which addresses these difficulties.

Exams may be a painful experience and this can relate to how they are able to manage in a formal exam setting. This also could include the stimuli such as the smell of a person's perfume, the lights in the room or sounds of a clock.

It is important to understand your student's needs and how their autism will impact on their ability to demonstrate their academic ability, knowledge and skills in an exam.

When planning exam accommodations for autistic students, consider the strategies that you have developed as a school and tailored to the needs of the student in their regular lessons and how your student achieves the most.

The AET Young People's Panel were asked: *What are your experiences of taking exams? The good, the bad and what would have helped?*

'Colour-coded timetable!' (Georgia); 'Separate room for just me' (Ollie)

'Consistency - Sometimes they put me in a separate room, sometimes not' (Jack)

'Extra time, enlarged papers, laptop, scribe and a reader' (Sam);

'Rest breaks! Allowed to go outside for fresh air/walk' (Ollie)

'Laptop for writing essays / long exams' (Sam)

'Being able to walk out for a break' (Jack & Ed)



Understand & refer to the **JCQ Access Arrangements***

Access arrangements include reasonable adjustments that are needed to make exams accessible for candidates who have disabilities. Examples are extra time or a reader.

Access arrangements for public exams are designed and regulated by the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ). There is a comprehensive book of instructions and regulations which includes, at the start, the following statement:

“The intention behind an access arrangement is to meet the particular needs of an individual candidate without affecting the integrity of the assessment.”

Each student with autism is an individual with a unique pattern of strengths and difficulties and the key to supporting them in exams is to put in place the correct package of access arrangements. Exam boards and educational settings have a duty under the Equality Act 2010 to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ and the JCQ recognise that this may take many forms:

“A reasonable adjustment may be unique to that individual and may not be included in the list of available access arrangements.”

The JCQ Access Arrangements document is updated annually and can be downloaded from the website (www.jcq.org.uk). This provides all the necessary information on how to apply for exam accommodations.

Make sure you leave enough time before you make an application for access arrangements. There are strict deadlines that can be found in the JCQ Access Arrangements document or by contacting individual exam boards.

Incorporate the access arrangements into internal assessments from as early as possible and definitely by Year 10 so that students are used to them and to provide evidence of their usual way of working. Trial different arrangements (such as a scribe or word processor) and see which will work best for each student.

The table below is a brief outline of the more common exam arrangements. Each arrangement is described in detail in the JCQ Access Arrangements document and there are specific rules and procedures governing each.

Some access arrangements such as extra time, a reader and scribe must be applied for online. This is usually done following individual testing by a qualified assessor and the compilation of significant evidence in a detailed report called a Form 8.

For students with autism, the requirement for testing and a Form 8 is removed. The centre must instead provide evidence that the young person has an impairment ‘which has a substantial and long term adverse effect’.

| Access arrangement | JCQ requirements | Implications |
|--|---|---|
| <p>Supervised rest breaks If the student is overwhelmed, the clock is stopped for an agreed period and the paper removed. The student can then sit at their desk or walk about outside until they are ready to resume at which point the clock is restarted.</p> | <p>No online application needed. SENCO must produce written evidence confirming the need.</p> | <p>The student will need a quiet room with an invigilator. The room may be shared by several students unless the student needs to leave the room in their break in which case they need 1:1 invigilation.</p> |
| <p>Extra time Usually 25% extra time is added to the allotted time for an exam e.g. a student is given 75 minutes for a 60 minute exam. (Rarely, up to or over 50% is awarded for which candidates must have two standard scores which are very substantially below average, i.e. of 69 or less.)</p> | <p>An application must be made online and supported by evidence that this is the student’s usual way of working and one of the following: 1) EHCP or 2) Assessment report (Form 8) or 3) Diagnosis of ASD</p> | <p>Extra time can be given to students working in a large exam hall or in a small room. It is also awarded to students with arrangements for a reader or scribe.</p> |
| <p>Reader or computer reader Software that accurately reads out text or a responsible adult who reads aloud instructions and questions in line with strict regulations.</p> | <p>An application must be made online and supported by evidence that this is the student’s usual way of working and one of the following: 1) EHCP or 2) Assessment report (Form 8) or 3) Diagnosis of ASD</p> | <p>One adult may read to more than one student or may act as a reader, scribe, prompter and invigilator on a 1:1 basis. It is important that the student feels comfortable with the reader and a familiar adult is ideal. A computer reader can be used in papers testing reading e.g. English language papers.</p> |

| Access arrangement | JCQ requirements | Implications |
|--|---|---|
| <p>Read aloud or examination reading pen It can help a student's comprehension to read aloud to themselves. An exam reading pen (provided by the centre) can be used for students who need occasional words or phrases read to them.</p> | <p>No online application or evidence needed. It must be the student's normal way of working within the centre.</p> | <p>Students reading aloud must have their own room. An examination pen requires practice and the student should be familiar with its use. If used with headphones, it can be used in a shared room.</p> |
| <p>Word processor The centre can provide a word processor with spelling and grammar check disabled.</p> | <p>No online application or evidence needed. It must be the student's normal way of working within the centre.</p> | <p>It is recommended that each centre has a policy stating who can use word processors. In all cases, a word processor cover sheet must be completed.</p> |
| <p>Scribe A responsible adult writes or types the student's dictated answers.</p> | <p>An application must be made online and supported by evidence that this is the student's usual way of working and one of the following: 1) EHCP or 2) Assessment report (Form 8) or 3) Diagnosis of ASD</p> | <p>A scribe can only scribe for one student but can also act as reader, prompt and invigilator for that student. The student loses any marks awarded for spelling, punctuation and/or grammar unless the student dictates them and this is recorded on the scribe cover sheet that must be completed.</p> |
| <p>Prompter A responsible adult who can keep a student focused on the need to answer a question and move on. A prompter may use the student's name or short phrases such as 'Sam, focus on the question'</p> | <p>No online application or evidence needed. There is no need to record the use of this arrangement.</p> | <p>A student with a prompter may be in a shared room or 1:1 with an adult who might also be a reader, scribe and invigilator. A prompter may not advise the student which questions to do or which order to do them in.</p> |
| <p>Oral language modifier (OLM) A responsible adult who may clarify the carrier language used in the examination paper but not any technical or subject-specific terms. This is a rare and exceptional arrangement and centres must show a very strong justification as to why it is needed.</p> | <p>OLM is not included in the online options. The centre must select 'other'. The request is automatically rejected and the centre must make a referral to the relevant awarding body. The candidate must have a very substantially below average standardised score (69 or less) in reading comprehension and/or vocabulary.</p> | <p>An OLM (who should be a familiar adult) must have completed an accredited training. The candidate and OLM must be accommodated in a separate room with a separate invigilator who must listen carefully throughout the exam. The OLM must complete a cover sheet listing all modifications made which the invigilator must counter-sign.</p> |

None of the arrangements above are exclusively for autistic students, but some are particularly tailored towards meeting needs related to anxiety such as the supervised rest breaks or a prompter. Many students need a combination of 2, 3 or more adjustments.



Know the format & requirements of the exam(s)

In order to prepare your autistic student for taking exams it is important to be familiar with the exam content and formatting so that you can provide individualised guidance and support. It is good practice to make use of any available previous papers and practice material.

- Are there particular subject specific requirements that you can prepare your autistic student for in relation to their individual needs?
- Are you familiar with the layout of the exam paper for the particular examination board and how you can prepare your autistic student accordingly?

You may wish to refer to the 'AET GCSE English & Maths Guidance' for further information in relation to subject and exam paper specific guidance for autistic students taking English & Maths GCSEs.

Once you are familiar with the particular examination paper requirements in relation to your autistic student:

1. Enable your autistic student to sit mock exams with past exam papers
2. Analyse their completed mock exam papers for common issues that you can incorporate into your teaching to support their exam preparation
3. Prepare a checklist or 'top tips' for your autistic students to refer to when working on past papers that can then be incorporated into revision guides.

AET Young Person's Panel quotes:

'They should be clear about the nature of exams at the start of the year so it's not a surprise.' (Jack)

'I didn't understand a lot of jargon in exam questions.' (Naomi)

'I needed help with preparation and what's going to happen in exams. Someone helped me revise with timed practice papers.' (Shane)

'Being in a room/hall with other people can be very distracting. It can be helpful to simulate exam conditions beforehand.' (Alex)



Prepare your student

In preparing your autistic student for exam(s), develop deep understanding of how the student learns best and personalise their provision to take account of this. Strategies you could use for example:

Reducing anxiety:

- “Oops” sessions when there are changes to the timetable; social stories to help students cope with tricky situations; schedules, cue cards and comic strips used instead of verbal communication at times of stress.

Accepting change and feeling relaxed when working:

- Vary seating plans and work partners enabling students to cope better with changes to their learning environment.
- Provide a staffed homework club and revision club for students who cannot/will not work at home.
- Vary the content of practice questions to give students the opportunity to apply their knowledge more widely.
- Access arrangements must reflect the student’s normal way of working. These arrangements should be used routinely in school exams so that the student becomes familiar with them and the school can assess their effectiveness.

Preparing for exams:

- Provide explicit teaching of how to decode exam questions so that students understand what they mean, what is expected of them and how to link it to their subject knowledge.
- Use subject specific vocabulary and “exam jargon” in class to familiarise students with the language used in exam papers. Ensure students are familiar with the layout of their specific exam paper(s).
- Provide opportunities for students to widen their experiences, for example by learning how to play card games using a standard deck. Cards are often the context for GCSE probability questions. Students lacking this experience may be disadvantaged.
- Explain the importance of showing working out. Share mark schemes with students when appropriate so they can see what/how much explanation is expected. Teach how to set out an answer in a logical way so that someone else can understand what they were thinking.
- Give students advance warning of where the exam will take place, how it will be conducted and how it may feel; which adults will be there etc. Ideally mock exams will replicate the exam experience in all respects.

- Explain that their exam will not be exactly the same as any of the past papers they have done; that there may be questions that are unlike any they have done before; they may find some of the questions difficult and that's normal (and ok).
- Students may need training in how to manage their time and how/when to move on to the next question, particularly when they become "stuck".
- Show students how to draw up a revision timetable which is realistic and includes planned breaks and changes of activity (such as exercise or a snack).

School preparation for exams:

- Care must be taken when writing practice questions to ensure that the language used is precise and unambiguous so that autistic students are not disadvantaged.
- Risk assessments should take into account the individuals taking the exam and the rooms to be used, including the possibility of sensory overload.
- Flexibility and sensitivity should be applied to exams within the JCQ guidelines. For example, one student was so anxious about a GCSE exam that he felt unable to attend. The situation was resolved by allowing the student to sit the exam in a room by himself (with an invigilator who also acted as his reader) and for his father to sit outside the exam room.
- Students are entered for exams early if appropriate. This may reduce anxiety as the students know that they can have another go at a later date.
- Wherever possible, exam readers/scribes should be adults with whom the students are familiar and comfortable. Tell students well in advance who their reader/scribe will be and what the adult can and cannot do. Readers and scribes must be given appropriate training. The impact on staffing for the rest of the school cannot be underestimated and this needs to be planned well in advance.



On the day of the exam

Before the exam:

- Consider how to help your autistic students cope with their day. This may be by keeping to familiar daily routines or by holding a breakfast club where students can share their anxieties and ask any last minute questions.
- Always give your students information about what happens next to their papers and the timescale for getting results.

After the exam:

It might be helpful for your autistic student to talk about the exam afterwards. This might already be good practice in your school and can be incorporated into your usual post-exam debriefing. However, for some autistic students it might be beneficial to provide an opportunity for them to have a 1:1 debrief straight after or the next day. This is particularly beneficial if they found a paper difficult so that the experience can be discussed and anxieties lessened before sitting another paper during the exam period.

Students with autism often lack insight into their own functioning or their insight is affected by anxiety, but reviewing an exam can become a really positive alternative to anticipating things that are still unknown. Reviewing an event such as an exam with someone else can make the process of reflection more positive and focused.

A post-exam debrief breaks the experience of exams into smaller parts, making it easier to see how they are connected and how they may have affected the outcome such as:

- Thoughts going into the exam and during the exam
- Understanding and managing anxiety and emotions involved
- The sensory experience of the moment and the environment

'Everyone had huge expectations and that put me under so much pressure' (Shane)



On Results Day

Results Day can be a challenging time for students with autism and in order to support students with the outcomes of their exams you may want to consider the following:

- Preparation for differing outcomes to lessen the impact of disappointment in an eventuality that they don't achieve the expected outcome.
- Provide appropriate support or a countdown to Results Day if the waiting period is going to be challenging for your autistic student.
- On Results Day, consider the room they will be receiving the results and whether a separate space can be made available and appropriate support for the autistic student provided so that the emotion of other students and the sensory impact of coming into school for results are managed in a way that is sensitive to your autistic student's needs.

AET Young Person's Panel quotes:

'Don't like that everyone opens them at the same time.' (Jack)

'(There) should be the option to have your results given to you privately.' (Jack)

Summary Checklist:

This is a summary of the key steps of good practice to support the implementation of exam accommodations for autistic students as a quick reference guide.

| Area: | Checklist: | Tick: |
|---|--|-------|
| Understand your student's needs | Do you understand your student's needs and how their autism will impact on their ability to demonstrate their academic ability, knowledge and skills in an exam? | |
| | Have you considered the strategies that enable your student to achieve the most in their regular lessons and how this will apply to your planning for exam accommodations? | |
| Implement the JCQ Access Arrangements | Do you have a copy of the current JCQ Access Arrangements document? | |
| | Are you familiar with the current JCQ Access Arrangements? | |
| | Have you considered which access arrangements will be required by your student? | |
| | Have you applied for particular access arrangements as per the JCQ requirements by the JCQ deadline? | |
| Preparation in relation to the specific exam(s) to be taken | Are there particular subject specific requirements that you can prepare your autistic student for in relation to their individual needs? | |
| | Are you familiar with the layout of the exam paper for the particular examination board and how you can prepare your autistic student accordingly? | |
| | Has your autistic student sat mock exams with past exam papers with the relevant access arrangements in place? | |
| | Have you analysed their completed mock exam papers for common issues that you can incorporate into your teaching to support their exam preparation? | |
| | Have you prepared a checklist or 'top tips' for your autistic students to refer to when working on past papers that can then be incorporated into revision guides? | |
| Preparation for the exam | Have you developed a deep understanding of how the student learns best and personalised their provision to take account of this? | |
| On the day of the exam | Have you considered how to help your autistic student cope with their day? | |
| After the exam | Have you planned how and when to debrief your autistic student after the exam? | |
| On results Day | Have you considered how to best support your autistic student on results day? | |
| Reflect on the exam process | What has gone well and what could have been better? | |