# **Student life at QMUL: a guide for autistic students**

# This booklet is designed to give you some advice and tips to support you as you arrive at University and settle in.

It provides information on where to go for help and how to look after your general wellbeing while studying at Queen Mary.

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# [**Where do I go for...**](https://qmplus.qmul.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=5385#section-3)**?**

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| Problems with my accommodation | Contact residential servicesEmail: residences@qmul.ac.ukIn person: Housing Services is located in The Housing Hub, Feilden House, Westfield Way, Mile End Campus |
| Problems with my physical health | See your GP. If you live on campus or in post codes beginning with E1, E2, E3 or E14 during term time, you should register with the Student Health Service.If you live elsewhere then you should register with your local GP |
| Problems with my mental health | Problems with my mental health: Visit the Advice and Counselling Service page:[www.welfare.qmul.ac.uk/emotional-wellbeing](http://www.welfare.qmul.ac.uk/emotional-wellbeing)This page explains how to make an appointment:<https://www.welfare.qmul.ac.uk/about-us/opening-times-and-contact-us>  |
| Problems relating to autism, including applying for examination access arrangements e.g. extra time | See the Autism Adviser in the Disability and Dyslexia Service (DDS) |
| Problems relating to a specific learning disability, such as dyslexia or dyspraxia | Visit the Disability and Dyslexia Service Office (Bancroft 2.06) or email dds@qmul.ac.uk  |
| Problems with my course such as missed lectures, coursework deadlines and/or exams, or on-going personal or health problems that will affect my study | See your Student Support Officer<http://www.qmul.ac.uk/studentlife/support/contacts/>  |
| Advice on module options, programme changes or my academic progress | See your Academic Advisor (also called a Personal Tutor in some schools). You can find out who your Academic Advisor is on your MySIS. |
| Funding questions, budgeting, financial problems, debt and government benefits (including Disability Benefit)Advice on my legal rights, including international problems, housing rights and council taxAdvice on retakes, interrupting my studies, or withdrawing from QMUL | See a Welfare Advisor:<https://www.welfare.qmul.ac.uk/our-services/welfare-advice>  |
| Questions about your enrolment, your MySIS record, exam regulations, getting a replacement Student ID Card, and other questions you can't find here | Go to the Student Enquiry Centre (West Corridor, Ground Floor, Queens' Building) or email studentenquiry@qmul.ac.uk  |
| Complaints and appeals | Email annie.mitchell@qmsu.org Annie is the Advocacy and Representation Manager, a QMSU staff member who is there to advise and help you if you should ever need to appeal a decision or make a complaint |
| Social opportunities | Visit the QMSU website, where you can find a calendar of events (including specific non-alcoholic events), find the list of societies which you can join, and also find volunteering opportunities. Many autistic student feels socially isolated, but remember that in order to meet people and develop friends, you must make the effort to go to suitable events. Societies are an excellent way of doing this, as is volunteering. When you volunteer you will tend to meet friendly and tolerant people, you will get to help other people, which builds confidence, and you will have work experience to put on your CV. |
| Advice and workshops on finding a job or gaining work experience | Visit the QMUL Careers Service website to find advice or book an appointment: <http://www.careers.qmul.ac.uk/>  |

**I’m finding my first year really hard**

If you're finding your first year at QMUL really hard, then congratulations! You are perfectly normal!

You have taken a very big step in coming to university; you may have been in your previous school or college for a number of years, and you knew how everything worked there. This may be the first time you have lived away from home. And yes, university work is harder - you are having to learn all kinds of study skills that you haven't been asked to use before. And added to all this, you have the added challenges of autism; in fact, you should be very proud that you have come this far already.

Every year, large numbers of students seek out university services because they feel like they aren't coping well with the transition, so you are not alone. Your first year only counts as 10% of your final degree, so give yourself the whole year to settle in, become familiar with university life, and work on your study skills. You are not doing nearly as badly as you think! Remember you can always come and talk to the Austism Advisor, the Advice and Counselling Service, or your Student Support Officer if you are feeling very worried.

**HELP! It’s all gone wrong!**

If things have all gone wrong, the Autism Advisor can help!

Sometimes things go wrong - perhaps you have been feeling overwhelmed, and have not been attending... now you are worried that you won't be able to catch up, or might even be deregistered. Perhaps it's something else.

Whatever it is, try to let us know there is a problem as soon as you can, or ask a family member to let us know. The sooner we know you're having problems, the more we can do fix them. But even if you didn't tell anyone straightaway, call, email, or visit the Austism Advisor and we will find a way to help you regain control of the situation.

Contact Melanie, at m.dupin@qmul.ac.uk, or on 020 7882 8887. You can also come to drop-in on Monday and Friday from 2pm – 4pm in in Bancroft 2.32.

**Staying well**

To give yourself the best chance at university, you need to look after your own health and well-being:

**Eating Well**

Eat healthy foods every day. The picture below represents roughly what proportion of your diet should consist of each food type. You should try to limit ready meals, fast food and pizza, unhealthy carbs (such as white bread, white rice and white pasta), and sugary foods such as cakes and biscuits, because these foods contribute to a lack of energy, low mood and poor sleep. Instead prepare meals using wholegrain foods, fresh vegetables and lean meats or fish.

Many students are not used to cooking when they first come to university, but this is a life skill that you need acquire, so give it a try!



*With thanks to Harvard School of Public Health & Harvard Medical School*

**Eating the Right Way**

For optimum health you should eat a healthy breakfast (such as wholegrain toast with eggs, or fruit and natural yoghurt. Then eat small meals as you feel hungry throughout the day. Always chew your food slowly, drink glasses of water, and avoid eating at night, which can harm digestion and sleep.

**Cooking**

If you are unused to cooking, you will find that there are cooking instructions on most food items, but the various parts of your meal may require different cooking times (so for example you must put one item in the oven, but then wait for ten minutes before starting to cook another item on the stove top).

If you find this difficult then you could write a list of what to do at what time, or use the timers on your mobile phone to remind you to start the next step, so that all the items are ready to eat at the same time. When cooking vegetables, which have no instructions, it depends on how you like them - if you prefer them crunchy you might boil them for only 4-5 minutes, but if you like them soft then it will take longer. You must experiment to find out what works best for you. You can also use Google to search for cooking advice.

**Promoting Good Sleep**

Establish a routine where you go to bed and get up at roughly the same time each day, where possible. Read the leaflet on Sleeping Well if this is a particular problem for you.

**Exercising**

Physical exercise is proven to promote health and well-being, and improve depression and low mood. For best results, combine exercise with fresh air and nature; go for a walk or run in a park during daylight hours. Try to spend at least 30 minutes a day outside, as this raises serotonin levels, which makes you feel better. The Students' Union also has a fitness centre, Qmotion, and various sporting societies that you could join.

**Staying Safe**

Take some precautions to stay safe around London; make sure you know where you are going and plan your transport in advance.

Memorise the number of someone you can call if there's a problem - such as a family member. If you need cash, remember to get it from the ATM during the day, rather than late at night, and avoid walking around with valuable things such as a mobile phone or mp3 player in your hand or on show, as you could be targeted by thieves.

Always avoid getting drunk or taking illegal drugs, as this can put you in serious danger.

**Financial Well-being**

Ensure you have all the bursaries, loans and grants that you are entitled to. If you are not sure about these, make an appointment to see a Welfare Advisor who can guide you (see Where do I go for...?).

Check the balance of your account regularly to ensure you have enough funds for what you need to spend. If you become more overdrawn than you have agreed with your bank, you will be charged fines, and these can quickly add up and overwhelm you. If you are running out of money, tell someone straight away - this could be a family member or one of the Welfare Advisors at QMUL.

**Building a Social Life**

Feeling isolated will have a negative effect on your studies and general well-being at university, and this is probably an area you have worries about. Know how to pick the right people to approach; if you are a quiet sort of person, look for other people on your course who may seem quiet and shy, or are sitting alone - they will be easier to talk to than those who are already in a big group. Sit down near them and then introduce yourself. Outside of your course, you should make an effort to join a society or volunteer - friends rarely just appear without you making an effort.

When meeting new people, remember that if you encounter people who try to make you do things you don't want to, such as drinking alcohol, they are not real friends. This is known as 'peer pressure', and you should avoid these people.

**Sleeping well**

The Sleep Council has produced an online booklet with tips on getting a good night’s sleep. You can find it at: <http://www.sleepcouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Get-a-Good-Nights-Sleep.pdf>



**Sensory problems**

Studies estimate that up to 90% of autistic people experience under or oversensitivity to sensory stimuli in one or more of the following areas:

**visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory** (sense of smell), **gustatory** (sense of taste), **vestibular** (movement and balance), **proprioceptive** (sensing where your body is in relation to other things) and/or **interoceptive** (noticing internal sensations, such as knowing that you've broken a bone).

At best, under or oversensitivity to these things can be annoying; at worst it can be completely overwhelming. If you suffer from sensory difficulties in any of these areas, you may have found your own ways of minimising the problem, but below are some strategies that have been known to help some people.

As every autistic person is unique, not every strategy will work for you, but if you see some ideas that you think you would like, then go ahead and try them.

**VISUAL (also known as Scotopic Sensitivity)**

* If you are going to have lectures or seminars in an unfamiliar room, visit it first to determine the best place to sit. If you are sensitive to light you may prefer to sit away from the windows, and not directly under the overheading lighting, as it may reflect on the surface of your desk. If you need a lot of light to be able to write, then the opposite may suit you better.
* If the desk you use is very reflective, bring something to cover it, such as a cotton placemat that will roll up and fit in your bag.
* Use your laptop to experiment with powerpoint slides - what combination of background colour and font colour suits you best? Some people prefer high-contrast, such as black and white, while others may be more comfortable with less contrast, such as a dull yellow background with grey writing. DDS can ask your lecturer to use more/less contrasting slides if this is a particular problem for you.
* Think about what level of light suits you best; if there is enough natural light coming from the windows, you could ask your tutor if the overhead lights could be switched off, or switched on if need an additional light source.
* If lighting is generally causing you pain or difficulty consider wearing a baseball cap to block light from overhead, and/or wear sunglasses.
* Coloured overlays (as used with dyslexia) can make reading easier, or use coloured paper for writing notes on - the colour that helps most depends on the person, so you will have to look at some different colours to see which feels best.
* Coloured glasses have been known to provide relief to people with the most serious scotopic sensitivity, but these must be made to the exact shade needed by a qualified optometrist or optician using a device called an Intuitive Colourimeter, and there is a fairly significant cost to this option.
* If you find looking at certain lights calming or enjoyable, carry a small light-up object around with you to use in times of stress. For example, on Amazon and a number of specialist websites, you can by glowing egg-shaped lights, or objects that spin and flash - depending on your preference. Find a quiet place to get the object out and look at it if you find this helpful.

**AUDITORY**

* There are a very wide range of earplugs available online, including those that still allow you to hear what is being said to you, whilst cutting down background noise (such as EarClear 20). These are very cheap and can be bought in flesh colours or clear to be less noticeable. You can also buy ones intended for sleeping, which are softer.
* Wear headphones - either the type that can connect to an mp3 player, or ones that are just sold as ear-defenders (often sold for people who shoot or work in noisy factories). If you need to wear these in class, you will need to explain to your lecturer that you are still listening to the lecture, as it will appear that you are listening to music. DDS can email your lecturer about this is you wish.
* Plan your routes around the campus to avoid noisy places. There are often stairwells and corridors that are not used as much. Alternatively you may wish to wait and arrive at your lecture last in order to avoid a noisy crowd of people outside the room. Try to arrive just as the last person is entering the room ahead of you, rather than being several minutes late (as lateness will annoy your tutors).
* Find a quiet place where you can go if you are becoming overwhelmed with noise. The chaplaincy is one such place (people of any religion, or no religion, are allowed to sit quietly in the religious space). You may know of other places around the campus that are usually empty and quiet.
* There are a number of free apps that you can download for listening to sounds that you find calming or enjoyable. These often include nature and water sounds, and a range of background sounds. You can also get sounds such as 'white noise', 'pink noise' and so on - these can be very useful for de-sensitising yourself over time. The various 'coloured' noise options make a softer sound, whilst 'white noise' is the harshest.
* There are also free apps for Binaural Beats. These only work with earphones or headphones and deliver specific frequencies into each ear. Binaural Beats are not a proven technology, but many people report that they provide relief from under or over stimulation. Some apps use just a continuous tone, but if you find this annoying or unpleasant, there are also apps that mask the continuous tone with nature sounds or classical music. Select the frequency according to what you need - 13-26hz (Beta Waves) if you are feeling spaced out and need to be alert and focussed, 8-13hz (Alpha Waves) if you need to be alert and relaxed, 4-7hz (Theta Waves) if you need to become deeply relaxed, and 1-3hz (Delta Waves) if you want to achieve deep sleep.

**TACTILE**

* Some people find that firm even pressure across the body can increase feelings of calmness and well being. It could help to wear a rash vest and leggings underneath your clothes. You can also buy soft seamless underclothes and socks from Skinnies.
* If you only require pressure at certain times of day, you can buy a waist support band that gives you the feeling of a tight hug. Only wear this for short periods, or it will lose its effectiveness.
* Chewing gum can be a very calming habit because it exerts deep pressure in the mouth.
* Some people may find that it helps to sleep under a weighted blanket. This can also be used to help you relax after an overwhelming day. Weighted blankets are available online but can be expensive - for a free alternative, you can try tucking your duvet under the mattress on one side, and then down between the bed and the wall on the other, so it feels tight.
* If you are under sensitive to tactile stimuli, you may find yourself wanting to fidget in class. Buy some stick on Velcro from a stationery shop (the rough kind) and attached pieces to things you carry around, such as your pencil case, so you can run your fingers over it when you need to fidget. You may find other textured objects that you like to fidget with; try to find things that will not cause a lot of noise or movement that will distract others.

**OLFACTORY**

* If certain smells are overwhelming to you, there are steps you can take to minimise them. One strategy is to carry a scent that you find pleasant, which you can use to block unpleasant smells. For example, essential oils come in small bottles that can fit in your pocket or bag.
* If the scent you like comes in large container, such as a bottle of shampoo, you can buy small empty bottles from Boots the Chemist and decant some into these, to make it more portable.
* You could rub some of the scent you like into a handkerchief or a sweatband that you wear on your wrist.
* You may like the smell of scented putty, which you use to fidget with in the classroom.
* If bathroom and cleaning products are overwhelming to you, look for unscented versions, or see if natural products are more pleasant than chemical ones.
* If you live with flatmates who create strong cooking smells that you dislike, buy a nose clip (intended for swimming) to wear for short periods at home, until the smells have reduced.
* If you need a solution that you can wear discreetly in public, try Woody Knows nasal filters, which you can buy on Amazon. You can add a drop of the scent you like onto the filters to help block other smells.

**GUSTATORY**

* If you find the taste of toothpaste overwhelming, you can buy OraNurse Unflavoured Toothpaste from Amazon and many online pharmacies.
* If you find yourself avoiding lots of foods that you know you need to be healthy, do take vitamin supplements, but remember that these are not a substitute for a healthy diet and you could still suffer health problems later in life as a result of poor diet. It is therefore better in the long term to find strategies for changing the flavours and textures of foods so that you can tolerate them.
* If the taste and/or texture of healthy foods like fruit and vegetables are unpleasant to you, try blending them into smoothies so that you can still get the nutrition you need. You can also buy these, although it is cheaper to make your own (Blenders can be bought for £10 from Argos and other online retailers). Get recipes from the internet or books - smoothies normally require a sweet ingredient such as apple to mask the flavour of the vegetables.
* Find sauces you like and use them to mask the flavour of healthy foods
* Contrasting textures can make an unpleasant sensation worse, so if you need to eat the parts of your meal one at a time, then go ahead.
* You may find that foods are easier to eat at room temperature (neither hot, nor cold). Remember that if you have cooked food and let it cool, it should be eaten that day, as bacteria will start to multiply over time. If you wish to keep the food for the next day, it must be stored in the refrigerator. Cooked foods should only be reheated once, then they must be eaten or discarded. It is not just meat/fish/poultry that can be dangerous if left too long; rice and pasta are also high risk foods once they are cooked and cooled.
* Feeling relaxed while you're eating is important - find things that help you, such as lighting levels, listening to music, or having weight on your lap.

**PROPRIOCEPTIVE & VESTIBULAR**

* Problems in these areas can sometimes be labelled as 'clumsiness', or even 'dyspraxia'. People who are under sensitive in these areas may enjoy 'thrill seeking' activities such as fairground rides, where they can spin, swing or fall quickly from height, whereas people who are oversensitive would find these activities very unpleasant.
* Wearing a tight rash vest and leggings under your clothes can help you to sense where your body - you can wear these one size too small if necessary.
* Take frequent breaks where you get up and move around.
* Consider activities like swimming or using the resistance (weights) machines at the student gym to develop greater body awareness. Note - if you feel you lack body awareness, make sure that you are not lifting so much weight that you are damaging your muscles. The gym staff could help you or you could Google the average weight a person of your height and weight should be working with.
* Buy a large gym ball for your room and use it as a chair for studying. These require you to keep making small movements to stay balanced and also help people who like to fidget.
* Take small items to fidget with in class, such as putty or blutack. You can also buy hand exercisers which are squeezy balls or hinged devices to develop greater fine motor control.

**INTEROCEPTIVE**

* Do you find that you have lots of bruises that you can't remember getting? Ever had a more serious injury that you were unaware of initially? You may have a poorly developed interoceptive sense. This can be dangerous, because you may not notice an injury or illness that requires medical attention, so be aware of the possibility.
* If you lack sensitively to heat, make a conscious decision to stand away from heat sources, especially open fires.
* If you see an unusual injury on yourself, such as a burn, redness/discolouration or swelling, go to a doctor even if it doesn't hurt.
* It is possible for a person to experience pain in the 'wrong place'; for example, a broken ankle could be experienced as a stomach ache, with no pain at the site of the break. If you think you experience this is in any way when you are injured or ill, be sure to let medical professionals know, so that they can examine you more thoroughly - otherwise the true cause of your pain could be missed.