



# Evaluation of a Leadership Program for Young Autistic Adults

Follow-up Interviews with Participants and Mentors from the 2013 Future Leaders' Program

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## **The Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC)**

Autism CRC was established in 2013 and is the world's first national, cooperative research effort focused on autism. We provide the national capacity to develop and deliver evidence-based outcomes through our unique collaboration with the autism community, research organisations, industry and government.

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"I want to see the best in autistic individuals and have them see that they can be their best as well. And Future Leaders is a really good platform to do that... I'm really, really proud to have been involved in 2013 and really hope that I can have some more involvement with it in the future as well. Because it really does deserve to be a program that has a lot more potential than what we glimpsed in APAC 13... We have the ability to change a lot of people's lives with this program and the more we push it out there I think the more people will want to get on board with it."

– Future Leaders' mentor

"I also want to see more of us succeeding in life, in general, and I thought the Future Leaders' Program has great potential. It's only just getting started. It has a lot of potential to be something huge that could really help a lot of people to find their feet in the world."

- Future Leaders' mentor

# Foreword – Judy Brewer AO

Sometimes the strikingly obvious slaps you in the face. For me, this happened when I attended yet another autism conference, but this time with my then 18-year-old autistic son at my side. In seeing it through his eyes, it seemed as though everyone was talking about him, but no one was talking with him. He had so much to say, but couldn't participate in an environment that did not allow for his participation, in a setting that had not considered sensory needs, in an agenda that did not allow flexibility, in a voice that limited communication to one type and a room of people who largely considered him an exhibit rather than an expert who could potentially be a golden resource to those who spend their lives studying autism.

The following year, through the auspices of Autism SA, we had a chance to change how autism conferences were conducted in Australia and through this process to consider how best to empower our young autistic adults to actively create a better and more inclusive future. From this the inaugural Future Leaders' Program was born. Twenty four young people volunteering from across Australia, coming together as a group and as individuals to enhance skills and to be mentored by some of the wisest and most experienced autistic adults and advocates.

A program that was ambitious, but as you will read in the excerpts that follow, one that more than achieved its goal in providing a new generation of autistic leadership. The Future Leaders' Program and the 'True Colours' APAC Conference lit a flame that has not only led to fundamental change in the way conferences are planned and managed in Australia, but changed many lives.

The amazing part for me is that it was not hard to make this change. In fact, the program itself, with its limited resources, did little other than bring this amazing talent together and validate their lived experience. The participants did the rest, returning from the gathering to take leadership roles in their families, their communities, their workplaces, in the organisations that represent them and in those that research their lives.



These are their stories.

Judy Brewer AO

Chair Autism CRC Ltd

Convenor and Instigator 2013 Future Leaders' Program

## Foreword – Jon Martin

The Asia Pacific Autism Conference (APAC 2013) was held in Adelaide, South Australia and served as a key mechanism towards starting a movement that recognised the strengths, talents and abilities of people on the autism spectrum. We adopted the conference theme of “True Colours” – Be Bold, Be Brave, Be Brilliant. As Conference Convenor, the challenge had been set to create an environment and program that ensured a new benchmark in inclusion and opportunity for the autistic community. Traditionally, autism conferences had been more “about autism” rather than “with autism”. The focus needed to shift.

APAC 2013 attracted over 1300 delegates from over 20 different countries around the world and was almost two years in the making. That was the easy part. The Future Leaders’ Program became a significant project requiring its own dedicated resourcing and commitment to ensure success. That was the hard part.

The Future Leaders’ Program provided the vehicle for people on the autism spectrum from across Australia to participate in APAC 2013 and a customised personal and professional development program that aimed to create amazing opportunities for amazing individuals. The project also endeavoured to make a clear statement to the broader “autism community” (researchers, professionals, educators, therapists, service providers etc). It was a statement about identity, acceptance, creating positive change, and recognising positive contribution.

The overall conference program endeavoured to feature the “autistic voice” – John Elder Robison (author and advocate) was a keynote speaker. Stephen Shore (author and advocate) was also a keynote speaker. Ari Ne’eman (autism rights activist who co-founded the Autistic Self Advocacy Network) was another keynote speaker. All these individuals are on the autism spectrum. They also gave freely of their time to run specific workshops for participants of the Future Leaders’ Program.

The planning and organisation for the Future Leaders’ Program was incredible and intense. Flights, accommodation, meals, conference venue requirements, navigation guides for Adelaide, the conference program, the conference staff all had to be organised with an “autistic lens”. It ranged from making sure that certain coloured foods were separated on a plate to having a dedicated toilet without hand dryers to developing Australia’s first “autism friendly airport guide” to training all conference staff in autism awareness.

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The Future Leaders' Program closed the conference with an awards presentation and a closing speech to a standing ovation. It was an incredible experience to be part of, a life changing opportunity for some of the Future Leaders and a cultural shift for many of the conference delegates. It was the start of a movement.



Jon Martin

Former CEO of Autism SA

Convenor 2013 Asia Pacific Autism Conference

## About the 2013 Future Leaders' Program

The Future Leaders' Program was a small pilot program that allowed 23 young adults on the autism spectrum aged 18 to 30 years to better engage with and participate in the 2013 Asia Pacific Autism Conference in Adelaide. It also included eight mentors who were adults over 30 years on the spectrum.

The Future Leaders' Program was run parallel to the main conference with participants attending the plenary sessions and keynote symposia but having Future Leaders' Program specific activities available during the concurrent sessions. This included three Q&A sessions, one with each of the keynote speakers on the autism spectrum: Ari Ne'eman, John Elder Robison and Stephen Shore. There was also a media training session offered and some Future Leaders participated in media opportunities at or around the conference. An orientation program and welcome dinner was also held on the afternoon prior to the conference.

The program also assisted the participants financially with registration fees, accommodation and flights. This allowed participants from outside of metropolitan Adelaide to stay together in serviced apartments across the road from the conference venue with support of the convenors of the Future Leaders' Program

## About the Autism CRC and its Values

Our vision is to see autistic people empowered to discover and use their diverse strengths and interests. Our mission is to motivate, facilitate and translate collaborative autism research across the life span, underpinned by inclusive practices. Our programs take a whole-of-life view from diagnosis and the early years, through the school years and into adult life. We are committed to inclusive research practices and coproduction of outcomes with those on the spectrum and their families to ensure our research provides practical and tangible outputs that benefit the community.

Autism CRC seeks to involve end-users in all aspects of its operations including being part of advisory groups for its programs and CRC policy and program development. The aims and intentions of the Future Leaders' Program in 2013 align with the Autism CRC's vision to transform the lives of people living with autism across their lifespan through end-user driven research.

## Aims of the Future Leaders' Program Evaluation

It was proposed to undertake a follow-up evaluation with the 2013 Future Leaders alumni. In-depth interviews were conducted with qualitative data for analysis. It was envisaged that this evaluation would result in case studies showcasing the achievements of the original Future Leaders' Program participants and providing a record of their outcomes. The report also includes key lessons learned, how the Future Leaders' Program assisted participants with success since the program, and their thoughts about potential future programs. These insights could then potentially be used to help inform the development of the concept for a new leadership program that builds on what the Future Leaders' Program did well and benefits from lessons on what could have been done better.

### Note Regarding 2017 Update

The original version of this evaluation report was completed in January 2017. The 2013 Future Leaders graduates were re-contacted in January 2018 and given the opportunity to share some of their more recent achievements.

## Where are the Future Leaders now?



**JACKY DEN HOUTING** lives in Brisbane and was 27 when she participated in the Future Leaders' Program. Already a registered psychologist before the program, Jacky has since become more actively involved in autism research by commencing a PhD through the Autism CRC. In addition to her candidature, Jacky is involved with the Autism CRC by serving on the Biobank Access Committee and she was one of the researchers who attended the Autism CRC's inaugural Researching Autism Together Workshop in 2015. Jacky has spoken at several autism

conferences since participating in the program and also believes the media is an important tool for helping to change community perceptions of autism. Jacky has given several radio interviews.

The Future Leaders' Program was the first large gathering of autistic people that Jacky had taken part. She describes the impact of that experience as being “actually way more powerful than I expected it to be.” Jacky describes the program as her introduction to the world of advocacy and the opportunities that exist for autistic adults to be leaders and have an influence. Jacky seeks to be as well informed as possible in order to be able to help educate others and challenge their perceptions. Since the program she has joined the committee of the Autistic Self- Advocacy Network of Australia and New Zealand (ASAN AU-NZ) where she is now serving her second term. Several of the mentors from the Future Leaders' Program are part of this committee, and Jacky has learned a lot from their journeys as advocates as well as their interactions with one another. This aligns with the advice that she would give to young leaders, namely “to educate themselves, to listen and to read and to learn from the people who have been there before you.”

Jacky sees herself having an influence with professionals and researchers through her knowledge and experience as a psychologist, researcher, lived experience expert and advocate. She describes the unique opportunities in this area as coming from the flow-on effects that research has on other parts of the autism world saying “you’re sort of making changes at the very beginning of the process then those changes flow down into the interventions and the practices that are offered to families and then that flows down into the ways that families perceive autism, the way that they sort of perceive their children and the things that they do with their children and that flows down into how the children grow up and how they feel.”

**January 2018 update:** Jacky was a finalist in the CRC Association's Early Career Researcher competition in 2017. She also presented at APAC 2017.



**HARRISON FISCHER** lives in country Victoria and was the Future Leaders' Program's youngest participant at just 19 years of age in 2013. He is now working part-time in a Catholic primary school and living independently in the same regional community as two other Future Leaders. As he has become more connected with his local community, his weekly footy tipping competition has grown from a small family group to having over 50 participants.

Harrison has held his job for almost three years now, and loves it. He attributes part of his success to his involvement in the Future Leaders' Program saying, "It was life changing because I don't think I would have had the confidence to get a job before that." He started out by providing some basic IT support but now his role has been expanded to also doing administration work as well as working with the students, both in the school library and through a school based chess club. There are quite a few students on the autism spectrum at the school and Harrison is proud to be someone that they can look up to.

Harrison experienced a major health challenge in 2014, but that hasn't stopped him from moving forward with his life. He says that, during his hospital experience, the confidence about his autism he gained through the Future Leaders' Program allowed him to educate hospital staff about how to be more autism friendly and engage with him more appropriately.

From Harrison's perspective, the Future Leaders' Program was also a good networking opportunity because "there were people who have similarities to me and I was able to have good conversations I think there was a lot of great opportunities to meet people and get to know them."

Harrison shares that he is personally motivated to be a leader "just because it means I can help people in their life and make a contribution to them." Harrison follows politics closely, and this is one of the areas where he feels he is passionate about being a leader and influencer. He has lots of ideas to share and thinks the biggest challenges in having an influence as an advocate are "just getting heard by ministers and stuff because there's always going to be a long queue of people and patience is another." He highlighted primary school children, disability organisations and his local church as other areas of interest and leadership focus.

**January 2018 update:** Harrison has been taking on new responsibilities in his job and is hoping to return to part time study in 2018 to further enhance his work opportunities. He is also known for making speeches to welcome people or say thank you at local community events.



**EMMA GALLAGHER** lives in Sydney. She was 25 when she was part of the Future Leaders' Program. She has finished her degree in early childhood education and is working in this field. She also has started a voluntary researcher position with Aspect one day a fortnight. In the future she hopes to pursue a career in autism research, which is a desire she says was sparked through the Future Leaders' Program.

Emma credits her program experience, including meeting autistic keynote speakers, with giving her new confidence in her identity as an autistic woman saying “before APAC I disliked my diagnosis and saw autism as a burden. Meeting Stephen and John showed me how challenges can be turned into strength. Hearing Ari showed me that anything can be achieved. I made strong friendships which I wasn't expecting. I learnt that I can be a leader in our community and I started at APAC by looking after others in the group.”

Since being involved in the program, Emma has been nominated for an individual achievement award with Aspect. She has developed an interest in public speaking, and did so for the first time at an Aspect book launch in 2016. She also hopes to submit an abstract to speak at APAC 2017. In addition to this she was also asked to mentor a student on the spectrum who joined the TAFE where she was studying at the time.

Emma thinks that being a positive example is an important role for young leaders on the spectrum. When asked what advice she would give to other young leaders she said “I would tell them to have faith in themselves, you don't have to be perfect but you do have to try your best. Leadership is a journey of learning and as long as you learn something and implement it for next time you are a successful leader in my books.”

Emma is passionate about advocating for the rights of young children on the spectrum in early childhood education settings and would like to see more awareness and training in autism for teachers. She says “I believe in grass roots leadership, making the most of everyday opportunities to teach, advocate and enlighten those around me to what autism really is, our strengths and what we can achieve with the right supports.” Conversely she says “my biggest challenge is interacting with people who have strong negative beliefs about people with autism, or those who believe that I can't possibly be autistic because I can speak well and communicate my feelings.”

**January 2018 update:** Emma's volunteer work has evolved into a part time position with Aspect Research. She also provides insights and feedback to Aspect as part of their Think Tank. Emma spoke at APAC 2017 and is on the 2018 Autism in Education Conference organising committee.



**DANIEL GILES** lives in country Victoria and was 23 when he took part in the Future Leaders' Program. He is proud to say that he has now been employed part-time for three years doing photography and graphic design in a job he started just one month after the Future Leaders' Program. Daniel writes a regular column for his church newspaper and has become involved with the ICAN Network as a mentor to young students on the autism spectrum. Along with one of the Future Leaders' Program's mentors, he was part of a group who have founded an annual fundraising and awareness-building walk for autism in his local area.

Daniel described the experience of the Future Leaders' Program as an “amazing opportunity to develop leadership skills and network with others. It was exciting being part of something that would change the way autism was seen in Australia, and possibly the world I felt like I could see my autism as a gift and something to rejoice in. I loved the atmosphere as a whole”.

Daniel has several areas in which he is having an impact. Daniel spoke as part of the APAC 2013 conference, and has continued to use public speaking as a way to educate the community about autism. Daniel has been invited to travel to Bhutan in 2017 to speak at that nation’s first autism conference. Daniel credits the Future Leaders’ Program with some of his continued growth and drive in this area saying “I think the program really shifted the way I thought about the presentations I give and I moved to a more strengths-based approach”.

Another example is Daniel’s involvement in a state-government reference group looking at accessibility of public transport. He considers that “my big passion is trying to improve accessibility to public transport and I’m often giving advice to schools as well. I see a particular opportunity to get them moving away from thinking about accessibility as just about access for people with wheelchairs that they’ve also got to think about the stresses that people with cognitive needs might experience in catching public transport and the impact that disruptions can have on us and even our independence”.

When asked about how he defines success as a leader in the autism community, Daniel says it’s all about having “another person with autism seeing themselves as awesome.”

**January 2018 update:** Daniel received an Order of Australia Medal in as part of the Queen’s Birthday Honours List 2017 in recognition of his service to the community and as a disability advocate. He also spoke at APAC 2017.



**TORI HAAR** lived in Canberra and was working in the public service when she was part of the Future Leaders' Program at the age of 25. She has recently relocated to country Victoria and taken a period of unpaid leave. This move has allowed her to be appointed by the Autism CRC to conduct the Future Leaders' Program evaluation and help develop options to extend the original concept into a new and expanded project. She is also excited to be living in the same community as two other Future Leaders.

Following on from previous study in psychology and linguistics, Tori also commenced a Masters Degree in Disability Studies the year following the program. She has been involved with the Autism CRC since early 2014 in a variety of ways including attending the launch at Parliament House, being part of the Research Academy workshop, providing advice on research proposals, contributing to data analysis for the Research Priorities Survey and being part of the "Apps for Autism" Hackathon that sought to link research with technology through collaboration between different kinds of experts, including those with lived experience.

Tori views the research community as a key area of opportunity and feels that "it's really important to try and avoid burning bridges even if you don't completely agree with everything someone is saying or doing. I believe that most people are well intentioned. People generally only change one step at a time and being willing to work with that can be a powerful thing." She is also part of the reference group for the Curtin Autism Research Group and was also a keynote speaker for their annual open day in July 2016.

Tori had not done any public speaking relating to autism when she took part in the Future Leaders' Program. Since the program she has presented at four autism conferences, a student-run university event on neurodiversity and her previous employer's World Autism Awareness Day event. She was also a part of her employer's Staff with Disability National Committee, has continued to post intermittently on her blog and was interviewed for a story on Lateline about girls on the spectrum in 2014.

She thinks that being an example and encourager of other autistic adults is really vital saying "the opportunity is to use your influence to increase the influence that others also have to share what you've learnt freely with others so it might be a little bit easier for them than it was for you."

**January 2018 update:** Tori recently moved to Brisbane to better engage with her role as the Project Coordinator for the Future Leaders program. She was part of the project team for the Autism CRC Research Academy Workshop in June 2017 and spoke at APAC 2017.



**LEEEANNE MARSHALL** lives in Adelaide. She was 22 when she participated in the Future Leaders' Program. She has finished her degree in special education and has been studying a Graduate Certificate in Disability Studies, which she hopes to transfer into a Master's degree in this field in 2017. She has continued to speak to TAFE classes about her experiences as an autistic woman and successfully gained a paid role in May 2016 speaking about her experiences to high school students through ProjectABLE.

Leeanne had multiple commitments at APAC 2013, as a speaker and part of a drama ensemble, in addition to the Future Leaders' Program. This meant she was not able to attend some of the Future Leaders' Program activities, but she still considers it as being a worthwhile and valuable experience saying “I really did enjoy meeting up with others and hearing from really respected autistic leaders” and “I really wish I had the opportunity to go to more than I did. Because I really enjoyed the events that I did go to.”

Leeanne has continued to be interested in drama, and was the main character in a play called Chase the Feeling which explored autism, theatre and anthropology and was part of the Adelaide Fringe Festival. She has remained in touch with her mentor from the Future Leaders' Program, who has continued to support and encourage her and also helped facilitate her having an opportunity to speak at the Special Education Expo. Leeanne has also continued to be involved with Autism SA, mainly through committees and focus groups. She was recently been asked to join a sub-committee of their board in 2017.

Leeanne described the characteristics of a good leader as “someone who is authentic. Someone who is trustworthy and really believes in whatever they’re trying to change.” She describes her own strengths as being “passionate and stubborn I am not afraid for people to not like me at times for standing up for what I believe is right.” She feels that her teaching qualification and her current study in disability provide her with credibility and a shared language with which to influence those sectors and advocate for positive change and more inclusive practices. She expresses frustration that different kinds of experts within the community do not always listen to or learn from one another. In the future, Leeanne would like to learn more about how to connect with other like-minded individuals in her local area to work together and make a difference.



**JARAD McLOUGHLIN** lives in Adelaide and participated in the Future Leaders' Program when he was 27. He has continued to pursue a Bachelor of Media and is hopeful of finishing this in 2017. Jarad is passionate about the media and has completed several interviews over the years across television and radio. He and one of the Future Leaders' Program mentors were interviewed by Radio Adelaide as part of promoting the program and this led to him reaching out to the station and joining their accredited training program to gain more experience. After completing his studies, Jarad hopes to work in the radio industry.

Jarad has recently been elected as a Board Director for People with Disability Australia. He had nominated three times before he was successful however he feels his recent appointment is a testament to his growth as an emerging leader in the last few years. He has also previously been the disabilities officer for his university student council and a board member for the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network of Australia and New Zealand. Jarad has also travelled interstate on a number of occasions to complete mentoring training and attend a camp through the I CAN Network.

He shared that “I really owe it to what I did with Future Leaders and how it nurtured me to become the outstanding, articulate, dedicated and determined advocate as you see me today.” He feels that his stamina is a key leadership strength and he feels that he has been successful in his leadership and advocacy journey in part because of his ability to both “Getting myself out there taking risks and laughing at danger” and in the face of failure “dust myself off and work harder”. Jarad would like to become more involved in mentoring and to be a source of advice and a role model for younger autistic people interested in leadership, especially those who are LGBTIQ+.

Jarad has a strong interest in both the media and in the intersections between the disability and LGBTIQ+ communities. Jarad volunteers in a variety of organisations and for specific events in this area and has written an article on his experience of being a gay autistic man for his university’s student magazine. He thinks there are opportunities for improved policies and procedures as well as awareness training in both of these domains, which would allow people with disabilities to feel welcome and contribute more meaningfully. He also thinks more work experience opportunities in the media industry for people with disabilities including autism would be highly valuable.

**January 2018 update:** Jarad has finished his Bachelor of Media and complemented his degree by completing the University of Adelaide Graduate Award career development pilot program. He also attended the Autism CRC Research Academy Workshop in June 2017.



**ALEX ROBINSON** lives in Sydney and was involved in the Future Leaders' Program at the age of 28. She has been working full time as a medical secretary for more than three years. Despite being outside of her comfort zone, she enjoyed her experience of the program "immensely" and felt that "meeting people who were on the spectrum from around the country and the world was great as it just cemented in my head that I wasn't the only one and that was okay." Her main complaint about the conference was that she wished it was longer.

Alex has been volunteering with Aspect since before the Future Leaders' Program. She has been involved in a range of activities including marketing campaigns and photography for art exhibitions. She also volunteered as a guide at the Autism in Education Conference in 2014.

She isn't completely sure which area of the community she would like to be involved in but feels that the education sector is very important and that she may like to speak at her former high school one day about her experiences. She is also considering extending her involvement with Aspect to include being part of a community engagement program called "Speak Out" which is led by Thomas Kuzma, another former Future Leader.

"Trust, responsibility, patience, faith and the ability to work with others" were the key characteristics that Alex would attribute to good leaders. When asked about her motivations she described "wanting to get things done as a group or on my own, whether it be doing a video about my life post diagnosis or helping with an event." She wants those around her to recognise her as capable and hardworking and describes her personal leadership goal as "to be able to show people that although I have a diagnosis I am still a human being and don't need to be wrapped up in cotton wool."

**January 2018 update:** Alex started a new job as an NDIS District Support Officer with Uniting in August 2017. She was part of the organising committee for APAC 2017 and helped coordinate the Facebook group for autistic people attending the conference.



**JOEL WILSON** now lives in country Victoria and was aged 26 when he participated in the Future Leaders' Program. At that time he lived in Perth. Since then he has been working towards his career goal of working in a school supporting and mentoring autistic students. He has worked privately with families to mentor their autistic children and completed a qualification in education support.



Joel's volunteer work with the Curtin Autism Research Group in Perth has

led to a paid role managing their social media page. He is a member of their reference group, a co-investigator in a research project looking at community perceptions about autism and came up with the idea of hosting an annual autism research open day in Perth at Curtin University which is regularly attended by over 300 people.

Joel has also provided input and feedback to other projects within the Autism CRC and was part of its Inaugural Research Academy workshop in 2015. At APAC he was awarded the Autism CRC Inclusive Research Award for his part in the Autism CRC Hub Connect website. He described his role as "providing feedback on the lived experience, as well as facilitating workshops with other autistic people."

In January 2016 Joel moved from Western Australia to Victoria to live independently for the first time (in the same community where two other Future Leaders now also live) and to further pursue his research and advocacy interests.

When asked about networking Joel observed "I got to keep in touch with a couple of people that kind of are really close friends now and people who I go to now for advice on what I do leadership wise and they also help to steer me in the right direction."

Joel spoke about several conferences he's been involved in since APAC 2013 saying "I spoke at APAC 2015 last year and I volunteered at the Victorian Autism Conference this year I was part of an autistic liaison group and we provided peer support."

In addition to all of this Joel has also been a People with Disability Australia Board Director and was part of an Australian youth delegation to the United Nations in New York for the Convention on the Rights of Persons with a Disability.

**January 2018 update:** Joel has started studying a Bachelor of Media Communications and spoke at the National Disability Summit in May 2017. He has recently purchased his own home and helps organise events for his local Autism Community of Practice.

## Evaluation Findings

### Interview Process and Response

Interviews were conducted with ten of the 23 Future Leaders who completed the program. Nine of these Future Leaders consented to having a profile included in this document. A survey was also completed by six of the eight mentors (some of whom were also part of the original project team).

The participant interviews included over 50 questions across seven different categories, specifically:

- Overall reflections about the program;
- Future Leaders' Program preparation and content;
- Accessibility;
- Thoughts and suggestions for a future program;
- Networking;
- Leadership knowledge and interests, and;
- Achievements and opportunities since participating in the Future Leaders' Program.

The mentor survey comprised nine open-ended questions, including one which allowed for final comments.

"I think considering that it was sort of a pilot program, I think it did most things pretty well really. I think, I guess, the real strength of it was just the fact that it brought together this group of autistic people and gave us all sort of the opportunity to meet each other and get to know each other." – Future Leaders' Program participant

"It was run by people with a deep understanding of the needs of autistic adults and was respectful of our needs and our desires. It respected our skills and supported us with our challenges. The program organisers tried very hard to accommodate everyone to ensure we were able to get the most out of the conference."

– Future Leaders' Program participant

"I think it actually inspired advocates like myself and others to be more active in the community around us, affirmed us as people with autism and provided a catalyst for future autism conferences to be more accessible to people with autism."

– Future Leaders' Program participant

## **Key Findings about the Program**

A key positive outcome people reported was feeling welcome and valued as part of the conference, not only by those involved in the conference but by the broader pool of delegates. People reported feeling like their needs had been considered, and that there were supports in place to help them feel safe.

Interviewees were asked to describe what the atmosphere of being in a group of other autistic adults as part of the Future Leaders' Program was like for them. Interviewees spoke about a sense of belonging, a place where they felt they could be themselves and be supported and understood. Several noted that they enjoyed the experience. Acceptance was discussed both in terms of people feeling accepted by the group, and feeling more able to accept their own diagnosis and value.

- Half of the respondents had not been to an autism conference prior to APAC 2013.
- Ninety percent of interviewees had attended another autism or disability related conferences since APAC 2013, with 70 percent having spoken and or volunteered at a conference.
- All of them felt that the conference was accessible and autism friendly.
- Ninety percent of the respondents felt the program made the conference more accessible and enjoyable.
- Eighty percent of interviewees felt there was a good balance between the Future Leaders' Program specific activities and conference participation.
- Ninety percent of interviewees felt that the Future Leaders' Program was a good networking opportunity for them.
- All of the interviewees had maintained some contact with at least one Future Leader or mentor after the program ended, with 80 percent having kept in touch with both.
- Seventy five percent of those who had kept in touch with a mentor had received support or advice from them since the program.
- Eighty nine percent of interviewees felt they learnt more about the sorts of opportunities they might have to be a leader.
- Eighty percent of interviewees expressed a potential interest in being part of a Future Leaders' Council to help provide advice on future iterations of a leadership program for young autistic adults.

## **Key Outcomes for the Future Leaders' Program**

- Eighty percent of interviewees said they had become more involved in public speaking since participating in the Future Leaders' Program.
- Half of interviewees indicated they had started public speaking since participating in the Future Leaders' Program, or had spoken publically about autism for the first time as part of the program.
- Seventy percent of interviewees indicated they had been part of a reference group since the program and 60 percent had been part of a board or committee.
- Eighty percent indicated they had worked with or provided advice to researchers or community organisations since being part of the Future Leaders' Program.
- Sixty percent of interviewees had gained new employment since participating in the program.
- Half had started a new course of study and most of these related to a disability area.
- Seventy percent of interviewees indicated that they had been involved as mentors since the program and half said they had been mentored.
- Eighty percent of the interviewees had been interviewed by the media during or since participating the program.
- Sixty percent of interviewees had been involved in writing blogs or media articles.

Interviewees were asked about groups and areas within the community where they could see themselves working or having an influence. The most commonly mentioned areas were autism professionals and researchers, autistic children, general community members, parents of autistic children, teachers and policy makers and government. Some also wanted to help encourage other autistic adults to accept themselves and pursue their own goals and leadership interests.

## **Key Findings from the Mentor Survey**

Eighty-three percent of the mentors who responded to the survey indicated that they had a positive and valued experience with the program. Some of the benefits mentors felt they gained from their involvement with the program are quoted below.

“More than I realised at the time. I am still in contact with many of the people, both mentors and mentees from the program and have continued to mentor my mentee as well as some other mentees from the program.”

“I went away seeing a model of how autism could be represented in a constructive positive way in those sort of environments [conferences] but also in society in general.”

“I learnt a lot of useful information from the Future Leaders’ Program. I learnt about some of the issues that confront other members of the autism community, such as difficulties obtaining work. I also obtained a lot of network connections that I use in my work and study today.”



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