



Supporting Staff and Students on the Autism Spectrum in Tertiary Settings: The Development of an Interactive Website

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Date: June 2017



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Australian Government
Department of Industry,
Innovation and Science

Business
Cooperative Research
Centres Programme

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ISBN: 978-0-9953735-9-4

Suggested Citation: Sofronoff, K., Kavanagh, L., O'Moore, L., Attwood, T., Richdale, A., Whelan, M., Hinton, S., & Day, J. (2017). Supporting staff and students on the autism spectrum in tertiary settings: The development of an interactive website. Full Report, Executive Summary and Visual Snapshot. Brisbane: Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism.

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Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the financial support of the Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC), established and supported under the Australian Government's Cooperative Research Centre Program.

The authors wish to thank Professor Sylvia Rodger, Autism CRC, and wish to acknowledge the participation of the following staff in sharing their experiences and challenges:

- Tutors in the EAIT faculty, The University of Queensland
- Professional and Academic Staff in the EAIT faculty, The University of Queensland
- Academic and Professional staff from various tertiary institutions who participated in the workshops.

The following people also gave their time and expertise at much reduced rates to build a quality website:

- | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------|
| • Mr Stephen M Irwin | Voice overs |
| • Mr Graham Schneider | Animations |
| • Mr Lachlan Whelan | Video and editing |

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

The Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC) is the world's first national, cooperative research effort focused on autism. Taking a whole of life approach to autism focusing on diagnosis, education and adult life, Autism CRC researchers are working with end-users to provide evidence-based outcomes which can be translated into practical solutions for governments, service providers, education and health professionals, families and people with autism.

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PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

The purpose of this study was to create an interactive website for academic and professional staff in tertiary institutions to assist in raising awareness of the types of challenges that potentially face students on the autism spectrum, and to provide information and examples of how they might most helpfully respond. Following some pilot work that was undertaken with the EAIT faculty at the University of Queensland, a workshop was developed and delivered to academic and professional staff in the School of Engineering. The purpose of the workshop was to (a) elicit information from staff about the types of challenges that they faced with students on the spectrum in their courses and tutorials, (b) provide information about why students might behave in the ways described, and (c) to role play how they might manage such challenges. By using the information gathered, a further workshop and website was designed to address the major issues and concerns that had been raised and to do this in an accessible and interactive manner.

STUDY DESCRIPTION

The study began with a Teaching and Learning grant from the EAIT faculty at the University of Queensland. The aim of the grant was to develop materials for staff to increase understanding of autism spectrum conditions and other mental health concerns, and to assist staff in learning how to better manage challenging behaviour. The primary outcome for this study was the development of a staff workshop. Initially, information was collected from tutorial staff in the School of Engineering about the types of student challenges they had encountered. This was used to inform the issues that would be discussed in the workshop. The interactions in the workshop further informed the essential content of the website. A further workshop was run in November 2016 that used the same format as the first workshop and allowed us to gather more examples of challenging behaviours encountered by academics and professional staff in a wider range of tertiary institutions.

DATA ANALYSIS

Each of the workshops was evaluated by a questionnaire that participants completed at the end of each workshop (n=58).

The website link was sent out to academics who attended the second workshop and indicated that they would provide feedback by an online survey. Nine academics from a variety of tertiary settings have completed that survey.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The ratings from the first workshop were all high e.g., 4.5/5 “the content was helpful”, 4.68/5 “I would recommend the workshop to other academics”, 4.93/5 “the speakers had a good understanding of the topic”. In response to the open question “what strategies did you learn that might assist you in dealing with challenging behaviours?” the most commonly mentioned strategies were –

- Validate the student
- Stay calm
- Be logical
- Take the emotion out of the situation
- Use a ‘GPS’ voice (factual, even-toned, concise and calm) and focus on the way forward
- Build trust

These strategies as discussed and demonstrated were taken forward into the website and used as essential components illustrated either by video clips or animations as well as text. The ratings from the second workshop were very similar to those from the first workshop and the strategies nominated as most helpful were also the same.

IMPLICATIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Academics from a wide range of schools and institutions attended the workshop that was delivered in November 2016. This included staff from the College of Law, School of Medicine, departments of Science and IT from a number of universities. The individuals who attended the workshops were very willing to participate, to provide examples of times when they encountered challenging behaviours, and were very open to thinking about positive ways to interact with students on the spectrum. The feedback from academics who have reviewed the website indicates that they believe that the website is useful, user friendly, and targets the types of problems encountered and that staff members would be willing to use the website. If academics are open to raising awareness of autism spectrum conditions then it could be possible to consider working through the website as professional development that staff could access through their university. The website also contains all the materials that are needed to develop a workshop for staff that can be delivered in a group format.

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OTARC/La Trobe website:

<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/otarc/>

Autism Queensland website:

<http://www.autismqld.com.au/page/588/New-Steps-Post-School-Transition-Programs>

Autism CRC 'Supporting Success for Students on the Autism Spectrum' website:

<http://www.tertiaryautismsupport.com.au/>

Faculty of EAIT website:

<https://www.eait.uq.edu.au/>