



Executive Summary

Program Evaluation: Peer Mentoring and Enhancing the Social Relationships of Young Adults on the Autism Spectrum

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Program Evaluation:

PEER MENTORING AND ENHANCING THE SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS OF
YOUNG ADULTS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

INTERNAL REPORT ONLY

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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.

autismcrc.com.au

Executive Summary

BACKGROUND

The transition into adulthood can often be a challenging experience for young adults on the Autism Spectrum and their parents, whilst at the same time this period is characterised by a tapering of services. Adults on the autism spectrum also have low rates of entering tertiary education and completing tertiary education. While universities provide transition support and accommodation for individuals with a range of disabilities, many adults on the autism spectrum who had attempted tertiary education found this support insufficient. If adequate support is not provided to these students to support their transition, students can face increased anxiety, depression and other mental health concerns and universities can face decreased enrolment and retention rates. Mentoring programs for university students on the autism spectrum have shown promising results internationally.

Aligned with the Living with Autism CRC's aim to improve opportunities for people on the autism spectrum to successfully participate in higher education, the current project aimed to develop, implement and evaluate a peer mentoring module for young adults on the autism spectrum attending higher education. Specifically, the objectives addressed in this report were to:

1. Finalize the design and development of the Specialist Peer Mentoring Program modules.
2. Implement the developed Specialist Peer Mentoring Program modules in programs at the University of Western Australia and Curtin University.
3. Evaluate the effectiveness of the Specialist Peer Mentoring Program for school leavers on the autism spectrum.
4. Develop the final research report.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This study employed a mixed methods research design, where data were collected through a semi-structured interview and a structured questionnaire. In total across two universities, 23 of the 39 (59%) mentees, 23 of the 29 (79%) mentors and 13 parents participated in the interview process, either through participating in a verbal or written interview. The interview included questions about the participants' expectations and experiences of the Specialist Peer Mentoring Program, including an overall evaluation of the program, perceived benefits and suggested improvements. The interview data were explored using directed content analysis. In addition, 24 of the 39 (62%) mentees completed the initial questionnaire and 23 of the 39 (59%) mentees completed the follow-up questionnaire. This questionnaire contained a range of measures, including the: General Self-Efficacy Scale, Personal Report of Communication Apprehension, Situational Communication Apprehension Measure, Self-Perceived Communication Competence Scale, Social Provision Scale, and Student Satisfaction Survey – Adaptation. These measures are described by reporting the range, mean and standard deviation. The data were not normally distributed and consequently pre- and post-test outcome measures were compared with Wilcoxon Signed-Rank tests.

FINDINGS

The design and development of the Specialist Peer Mentoring Program modules was finalized, with resources created for program coordinators, mentees and mentors to allow the program to be implemented at other universities.

The Specialist Peer Mentoring Program was implemented with 32 mentees at Curtin University and seven mentees at the University of Western Australia. This program implementation was described from the participants' point of view (23 mentees and 23 mentors), in relation to:

- Where and when they met.
- How they communicated.
- What they discussed.
- Group meetings for social and supervision purposes.

The program evaluation demonstrated mixed results, with qualitative findings suggesting that the Specialist Peer Mentoring Program was very effective in improving a range of academic, social and quality of life outcomes for university students on the autism spectrum. However, the preliminary quantitative results did not identify a significant improvement in these outcomes. Benefits for mentees gathered through interviews included:

- Improved transitions into tertiary studies.
- Retention at university.
- Links to other university services.
- Academic performance (completing tasks in a timely and quality manner)
- Social outcomes.
- Personal development.
- Mental health / wellbeing.
- Confidence
- Independence.

Mentors described the program as intrinsically rewarding, and reported improved academic performance and personal development. Parents identified improvements to their own quality of life as a result of the program. Finally, it was suggested that universities experience benefits from the program in relation to student recruitment, academic performance, and retention. Suggested improvements for future iterations of the peer mentoring program included:

- Earlier intervention at university before issues arise
- Continuity during inter-semester break and when the mentor leaves.
- Improved communication with parents
- Links to post-university services.

LIMITATIONS

Whilst the findings from this research project provide preliminary support of the Specialist Peer Mentoring Program, the results were limited due to:

- Participant recruitment - not all mentees who took part in the Specialist Peer Mentor Program completed the interview and questionnaires.

- Questionnaire completion - not all mentees completed all items on the questionnaire and participants completed questionnaires at varying time points.
- Data analysis process - processed data were not available at the time of reporting for all variables.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

As this program evaluation provides preliminary support for a Specialist Peer Mentoring Program to assist university students on the autism spectrum, there are subsequent implications for researchers to conduct further investigations to expand upon this initial evidence.

The Specialist Peer Mentoring Program has been identified as a service that is highly valued by university students on the autism spectrum, along with their mentors and parents. This has implications for practice in other Australian and international universities, as these institutions have the opportunity to implement Specialist Peer Mentoring Programs to support their own students who are on the autism spectrum. This would open opportunities for a greater number of individuals on the Autism Spectrum, along with their families and universities, to access the wide range of perceived benefits resulting from participation in such programs.

KEY PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Provide this preliminary feedback, along with the refined findings, to the program coordinators at Curtin University and the University of Western Australia to ensure that improvements can be made to the program where possible, and the Specialist Peer Mentoring Program Modules can be updated as appropriate.
2. Make the Specialist Peer Mentoring Program Modules publically available so that other Australian universities can implement the program at their own institution to assist a greater proportion of students on the autism spectrum via autismcrc website.

3. Send link to the modules to all disability support services in Australian Universities.
4. Conduct further qualitative analysis of the interview data collected from mentees, mentors and parents to explore important aspects of their experiences, such as by focusing on relationships, strategies and transitions.
5. Conduct more in-depth quantitative analysis of the questionnaire data to determine if any significant changes can be detected. Further data collection may be necessary to secure a larger sample or data spanning a longer duration, as these factors may improve the likelihood of detecting significant relationships.
6. Disseminate these refined findings through submitting approximately three manuscripts to peer-reviewed journals and abstracts to relevant conferences.