



# Studio G multimedia program for young adults on the autism spectrum: Examining the impact on social participation, well-being, and post school transition

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

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## PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

Recent Australian studies of young people on the autism spectrum with average to above average intelligence suggest that they can experience a range of challenges when transitioning to adult life, including social isolation, reduced participation in employment and tertiary education and training, and high rates of mental health difficulties (Autism Spectrum Australia [Aspect], 2013; Neary, Gilmore, & Ashburner, 2015). The Studio G Post-School Transition Program was developed by Autism Queensland in 2014 to help young people on the spectrum aged 16-24 years overcome these challenges and successfully transition to adult life. Development of the program was underpinned by a number of key considerations: (a) an interest-based approach, (b) strengths-based practice, (c) social role valorisation principles, (d) support needs of people on the spectrum during key life transitions, (e) the qualities of the mentors, and (e) constructivist teaching principles.

## THE STUDIO G PROGRAM

Studio G aims to create a nurturing environment in which students (young people on the spectrum) are guided by mentors with skills and experience in the creative industries to complete projects in accordance with self-identified goals. Projects cover a variety of multimedia areas, including computer game development, photography, graphic design, animation, music and sound, short film making, and creative writing. There is one mentor for every four Studio G students, so as to allow time for one-on-one mentoring and for the students to build trusting relationships with their mentors. Mentors and students are matched based on their project interests and skills. The Program Coordinator facilitates the transition process with an individualised case management structure. Studio G sessions run for three hours on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons for 10 week terms, with four terms running per year. Sessions are based at The Edge at the State Library of Queensland (SLQ) in Brisbane, Australia. The SLQ is in a central location close to various transport nodes, which facilitate independent travel to and from the venue. The Edge offers a creative space and provides access to software, internet, and technology support.

## AIM OF THIS STUDY

The aims of this project were two-fold:

1. To evaluate the impact of Studio G on students
2. To gather feedback on Studio G to inform its ongoing refinement and improvement

Specifically, the first aim was to evaluate the impact of the program on the students'

- social participation and friendship networks;
- emotional well-being;
- project skills; and
- awareness of and transition to further study, training, and/or employment.

The second aim was to gather feedback on the program from the students, their family members, and the mentors, through identifying their

- satisfaction with the program, and
- perspectives on how the program could be improved.

## STUDY DESCRIPTION

Generic qualitative inquiry involving analysis of data from semi-structured interviews and responses to open-ended questions from mentor records was used. Generic qualitative inquiry is considered appropriate when asking participants questions in real world settings with the aim of improving programs and developing policies (Patton, 2015). All semi-structured interviews were conducted by the same research assistant, the second author (NB). Several strategies were implemented to improve the rigour of the evaluation: (a) triangulation; (b) member checking; (c) prolonged engagement in the field; and (d) use of rich, thick descriptions (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2015).

Participants were 11 young people on the autism spectrum (eight male and three female) aged 17-21 years ( $M = 19.00$ ,  $SD = 1.61$ ) who were attending Studio G (hereafter referred to as students), 12 of their family members, and seven Studio G mentors (six male and one female) aged 21-30 years ( $M = 23.71$ ,  $SD = 3.20$ ). Students and family members each participated in two semi-structured interviews, one near the beginning and one near the end of the Studio G semester. Mentors completed fortnightly records of their students' progress throughout the semester and participated in a semi-structured interview near the end of the semester.

## DATA ANALYSIS

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the data gathered from semi-structured interviews with students, family members, and mentors, as well as responses to open-ended questions from mentor records. Qualitative content analysis is a method of eliciting contextual meaning from text through the development of emergent themes (Patton, 2015). An a priori coding system was used to highlight information relevant to the research aims (i.e., the impact of the program on the students' social participation, friendship networks, emotional well-being, project skills, awareness of and transition to further education or employment; and feedback on satisfaction with the program and areas that could be improved).

## SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

The themes that emerged from the data in regard to the impact of Studio G on various aspects of the students' lives included two main categories of outcomes: (a) psychosocial outcomes, and (b) learning and development outcomes. Two key themes emerged in relation to the features of the program that appeared to contribute to the students' positive outcomes and to the satisfaction of participants with the program: (a) the role of the mentors, and (b) the nature of Studio G as a learning environment. The program's vocational outings and social activities were also perceived as contributing to positive outcomes. The findings are represented diagrammatically in Figure 1. Because of the substantial overlap between the themes, they are depicted using intersecting circles.

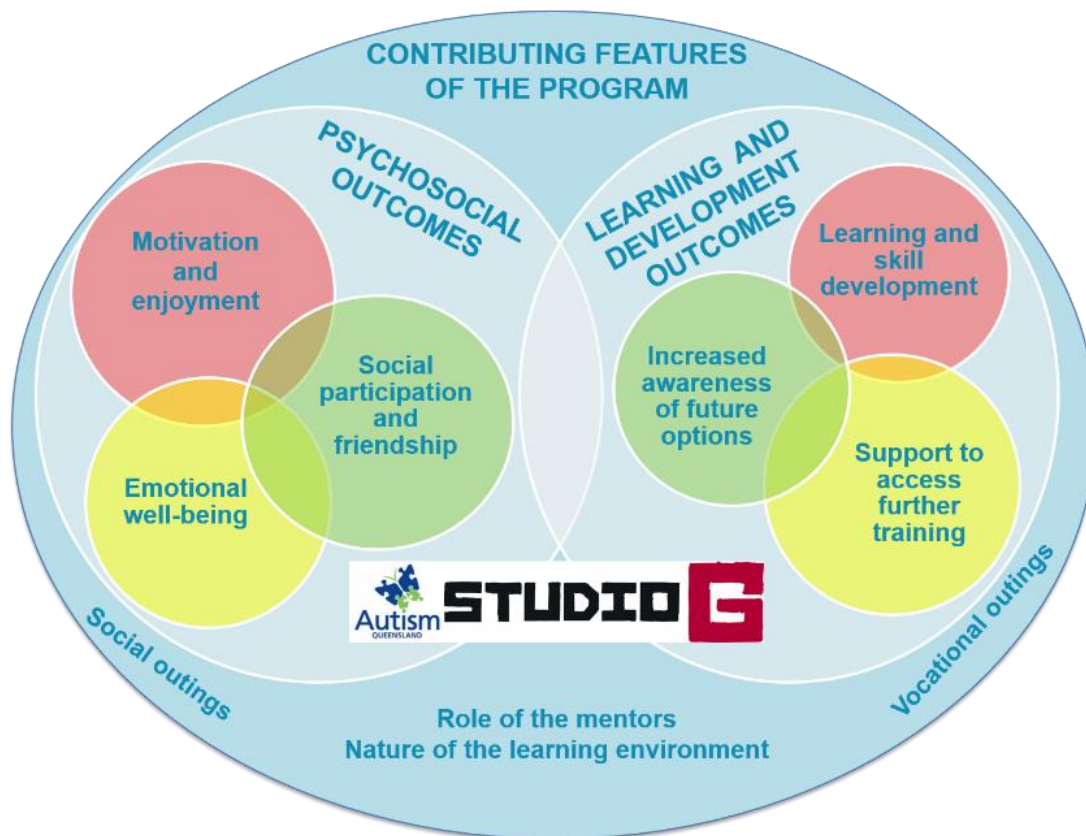


Figure 1. Summary of positive outcomes and contributing features of the program.

## 1. PSYCHOSOCIAL OUTCOMES

Three sub-themes emerged in relation to psychosocial outcomes: (a) strong motivation and enjoyment in attending Studio G, (b) enhanced social participation and friendship networks, and (c) improved emotional well-being.

### 1.1 Motivation and enjoyment

- The Studio G program was found to have a mean attendance rate of 96%, ranging from 82% to 100%. The majority of sessions had a 100% attendance rate.
- The students' high motivation to attend, and enjoyment of the program, was reflected in comments such as "I love Studio G ... this is my place," they "can't wait for the next Studio G day," and that they would "like to keep going for the rest of the future."
- Likewise, family members commented on the students' strong motivation and enjoyment in attending Studio G (e.g., "He comes home ... on a real high, he just loves going"), particularly in comparison to activities the students had previously attended. Family members' comments also suggested that Studio G provided incentive for the students to leave the house, rather than "sitting at home in [their] room on [their] computer day in and day out."

## 1.2 Social participation and friendship

- When asked if they had become friendly with other people in Studio G, 10 of the 11 students referred specifically to at least one other Studio G student as their friend. The eleventh student said he had *“become friendly with most of them”* in the program. It was observed by one of the mentors that *“there’s certainly a lot more noise and a lot more interaction between the groups ... that’s the sociable side of things and that’s exploded.”*
- Numerous comments from students and family members suggest the program naturally facilitated social participation and friendships by creating an *“an opportunity to mix with like-minded people”* who *“have the same interests.”*
- Two students were observed by their mentors and family members as becoming markedly more sociable within the program; these students were particularly withdrawn to begin with (e.g., *“When [Jeff] first came to Studio G he was really, you know, found it hard to get out of the house ... [Jeff] is one of our most social participants now”* – mentor).

## 1.3 Emotional well-being

- Studio G was reported to add value and meaning to the students’ lives (e.g., *“It’s keeping my life filled with stuff”* – student). Attending the program and interacting with like-minded people also helped students to feel less isolated (e.g., *“It’s opened her into an area that she doesn’t feel isolated being different from other people ... it’s been good for her emotionally and mentally to know there are other people out there ... just like her”* – family member).
- Friends within the program appeared to act as a support network for one another. Some of the mentors commented on how they were able to provide support for the students as well (e.g., *“If something’s happened at home ... this has been a place to talk about it”* – mentor).
- Family members and mentors observed improvements in the students’ happiness and confidence as a result of attending Studio G (e.g., *“He’s been the happiest I’ve seen him in a long time ... I see such a difference in [Aaron] since he’s been going there”* – family member).
- Most students expressed pride in the projects they had developed over the semester (20 weeks of sessions), and two students expressed pride in being a part of Studio G itself.

## 2. LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES

Three sub-themes emerged with respect to learning and development outcomes: (a) learning and development of skills; (b) increased awareness of options for future study, training, and employment; and (c) support to access further study, training, and employment.

### 2.1 Learning and skill development

- At Studio G, the students developed skills in a wide range of projects, often in the area of their special interest, including game development, creative writing, animation, music production, short film making, video editing, photography, graphic design, web design, and fashion design.
- Students and family members frequently commented on how Studio G provided an opportunity for learning and developing skills (e.g., *“I’ve learnt heaps”* – student). Comments from the mentors also demonstrated that the students were *“slowly gaining skills”* and had *“all learnt something new.”*

- Family members appreciated that Studio G provided an opportunity for both learning and socialising (e.g., “[Kyle] *is learning, he’s mentally stimulated, and he’s socialising*”). Likewise, students enjoyed being able to socialise and learn at the same time (e.g., “*It’s fun coming here, you get to interact with people ... I learn at the same time as well*”).
- For some students, Studio G facilitated a more comprehensive learning experience that they might not otherwise have had (e.g., “*He learns more than somewhere else ... Studio G is much better ... in [other workshop], they made only shapes ... at Studio G, they come to life, you know, they make moving things*” – family member).

## 2.2 Increased awareness of future options

- For some students, Studio G raised their awareness of options for further study or employment in their areas of interest (e.g., “[Gary] (mentor) *introduced me to a TAFE course that they do in music*” – student).
- Some students found it difficult to articulate their transition goals or plans. While mentors commented that progress could be slow, students were “*picking up at least passions ... that’s pretty important*” (mentor).
- Most of the mentors reported that they drew on their own experience (e.g., “*a lot of us have already gone through it ourselves*”) when educating students about their future options. Some commented on the program’s vocational outings as a source of increased awareness for the students.
- Many family members reported that they were unable to comment on whether the students’ awareness of future options had improved. Nonetheless, they were supportive of the program and the mentors’ ability to educate the students (e.g., “*I’m really comfortable and really confident with Studio G that it will actually give [Ian] the knowledge to make his decisions about where he’s going and what he’s doing*”).

## 2.3 Support to access further training

- Studio G was able to actively support some students to access further training. One student was supported by the Program Coordinator to undertake a traineeship, and another student enrolled in a technical and further education (TAFE) course on the advice of his mentor. Both chose to continue attending Studio G alongside their studies and training. A third student was supported by the Program Coordinator in arranging a work experience placement for later that year.
- The Program Coordinator and mentors informed students of an internship program for young people on the spectrum with an information technology company, and assisted those who wished to apply with the application process.

## 3. CONTRIBUTING FEATURES OF THE PROGRAM

Two features of the program that appeared to contribute to the students’ positive outcomes and to the satisfaction of participants with the program were (a) the role of the mentors, and (b) the nature of Studio G as a learning environment. The program’s vocational outings and social activities were also perceived as contributing to positive outcomes.

### 3.1 The mentors

- Positive comments about the mentors were made by all of the students and almost all of their family members. They were referred to as “*encouraging,*” “*friendly,*” “*helpful,*” “*knowledgeable,*” and “*supportive.*”



- Some students regarded the mentors as one of their favourite aspects of Studio G, particularly as they were *“like peers ... instead of being like a higher authority.”*
- The mentors were able to utilise their skills and experience in the creative industries to assist students with developing skills and *“give people a little glimpse as to what it's like in [their] chosen fields of expertise.”*

### 3.2 Learning environment

- Numerous positive comments were made about the self-directed, flexible, and pressure-free nature of Studio G as a learning environment (e.g., *“It's been a lot more relaxing than a more formal environment”* – family member), in direct contrast to descriptions of the students' experiences in school and postsecondary education, where many encountered a lack of learning support.
- Although the relaxed nature of Studio G as a learning environment was perceived to be highly desirable by the students and family members, one of the mentors was concerned that the nurturing and supportive qualities of Studio G may misrepresent the “real world” experiences that students would have later in life.

### 3.3 Activities and outings

- Vocational outings were planned in line with the students' interests and goals to provide insight into working in the industry or commencing further study. For example, many students were interested in working in the game development industry, so a visit to a nearby game development studio was arranged. This assisted the mentors with stimulating conversation with the students about future employment options and helped some students formulate their career aspirations.
4. Students and program staff spent part of the last session of each term at a chocolate café, a short walk from the program venue, to relax and socialise. During the semester, one session was dedicated to “Games Day” with no electronics, to facilitate social interaction and encourage the students to take a break from their projects.

## 5. FEEDBACK ON THE PROGRAM

### 4.1 Satisfaction of students and family members

- Overall, students and family members expressed satisfaction with the program. Comments such as *“I am satisfied with Studio G,”* and *“we're happy with the program,”* were common.
- Students and family members reported on their satisfaction with the venue, with many commenting that the location was ideal. Some family members commented on how the location provided an opportunity for their child to develop independence by getting public transport to the program.
- In general, family members conveyed satisfaction with the frequency and duration of the sessions, although a few commented on their desire for more sessions.

### 4.2 Feedback from students and family members

- The most common issue described by family members was that they felt they did not receive sufficient feedback from program staff regarding what the sessions involved and what the students were achieving. Some family members also suggested the need for more emphasis on goal-setting and monitoring achievements in the program.

- A small number of family members, and one student who paid his own program fee, referred to the cost of the program as a disadvantage. Although they felt the program was worthwhile, the cost was a factor that made continuing for another term difficult.
- The most common issue raised by students related to minor aspects of the venue, including the comfort of the chairs, the lack of windows in one of the rooms, the internet signal, and the noise levels. A small number of students also expressed a desire for more mentors, as they felt their mentor was sometimes too busy to attend to them or provide them with one-on-one support.

#### 4.3 Feedback from mentors

- The mentors reported high job satisfaction and found observing the students' progress rewarding.
- The most common challenge mentors encountered was that the students sometimes lacked motivation to work on their projects. The mentors emphasised that the best approach was to evaluate the energy and mood of the students before tackling project work.
- One issue to which some mentors drew attention was that they had not received any autism-specific training at the beginning of the program. However, they expressed the view that autism-specific training may have prejudiced their perceptions of the students by creating expectations that the students would have certain characteristics.
- Rather than autism-specific training, most of the mentors felt they could have benefited from the establishment of a professional protocol, including the boundaries and expectations of their role as mentors.

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings suggested that the students made substantial psychosocial gains by attending Studio G. These included high levels of motivation to attend the program and enjoyment of the program, increases in social participation and friendships, and improved emotional well-being. The students were also reported to have acquired many new skills at Studio G and increased their awareness of future study, training, or employment options. Two students made the transition to further study and/or training. Based on the findings of this evaluation, it is highly recommended that the program continue. A number of suggestions for revision to and continuation of the Studio G Program can be made:

- A gradual transition process (i.e., part-time enrolment at Studio G alongside tertiary education or training) to maximise support and prevent drop-outs.
- The trial of a formalised transition planning tool to augment the current informal transition process by assisting the students to develop and articulate their goals and aspirations (e.g., *Successful Transition to Employment – Autism Spectrum Disorders [STEP-A™]*, currently being developed and trialed through the Autism CRC by PhD candidate, Megan Hatfield).
- The trial of professional development for mentors on autism-specific evidence-informed strategies to facilitate learning and overcome the motivation challenges of the students. Strategies such as visual instruction methods, concept mapping, and structured teaching are considered “conventional wisdom” when teaching and guiding young people on the

spectrum through project development and task completion (Ganz, 2007; Hume, 2011; Mesibov & Shea, 2010; Roberts & Joiner, 2007).

- The establishment of a professional protocol, including the boundaries and expectations of the role of the mentors and their relationship with the young people on the spectrum.
- As family members play an important role in the planning and execution of their child's transition (Lee & Carter, 2012), it may be worthwhile exploring ways to facilitate collaborative communication with the family members and to encourage their involvement in each stage of the young person's transition process. On the proviso that the students give their permission for Studio G to share information with family members, regular feedback on the young person's progress and achievements within the program should be provided to family members.
- Adjustments to accommodate the students' concerns with the venue (e.g., noise-cancelling headphones for students who are bothered by noise while working at Studio G).

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