



**Sylvia  
Rodger  
Academy**



**autism  
spectrum**  
AUSTRALIA

# Future Leaders 2022: Community Projects Program

## Evaluation Report

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Dr Olivia Gatfield

**March 2023**



The Sylvia Rodger Academy is an initiative of Autism CRC

[autismcrc.com.au](https://autismcrc.com.au)

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## Evaluation Report

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***The Future Leaders 2022 residential workshop participants and delivery team***

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## **Autism CRC**

Autism CRC are the independent national source of evidence for best practice in relation to autism across the lifespan and the spectrum. We provide the national capacity to develop and deliver evidence-based outcomes through our unique collaboration with autistic people, families, professionals, services providers, researchers, and government. Together, we are addressing agreed needs and co-producing outputs with these stakeholders for the benefit of the community.

The Sylvia Rodger Academy is an initiative of Autism CRC. The Academy delivers nationwide programs aimed at empowering autistic adults. Its vision is to see autistic people thriving through discovering and using their strengths.

**[autismcrc.com.au](http://autismcrc.com.au)**

## **Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect)**

Aspect delivered Future Leaders in partnership with Autism CRC in 2019, 2020 and 2022. Aspect is Australia's largest service provider for people on the autism spectrum. Aspect's mission is to work with people of all ages on the autism spectrum, delivering evidence-informed solutions that are person-centred, family focused and customer driven.

**[autismspectrum.org.au](http://autismspectrum.org.au)**

## **A note on terminology**

We recognise that when referring to individuals on the autism spectrum, there is no one term that suits all people. In our published material and other work, when speaking of adults we use the terms 'autistic person', 'person on the autism spectrum' or 'person on the spectrum'. The term 'autistic person' uses identity first language, which reflects the belief that being autistic is a core part of a person's identity.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is diagnostic terminology used by the healthcare sector and is used in the context of a person being 'diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder'.

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# 1. Background

Future Leaders is Australia's first holistic leadership capacity building program for autistic adults. It was designed to empower autistic adults with leadership potential who want to make a positive impact in their communities.

The first Future Leaders was a small pilot program that allowed 23 autistic adults, aged 18 to 30, to better engage with and participate in the 2013 Asia Pacific Autism Conference (APAC) in Adelaide. In 2016, Autism CRC conducted an evaluation of the 2013 program. After completing the evaluation, Autism CRC started working with leaders in the autism community to develop an expanded program which incorporated a holistic approach to training and development. The revised and expanded program was designed, developed, and delivered with autistic adults, to 14 adults in 2018 aged between 25 and 40. Based on evaluation, elements of the program were modified and re-delivered to 15 autistic adults in 2019, with no upper age limit. In 2020, the Program was re-delivered to 15 autistic adults entirely online due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2022 the Future Leaders: Community Projects Program was launched. This version of Future Leaders focused on participant's ideas to improve their community – providing them with the knowledge and skills to develop and deliver community projects. The 2022 program utilised the same format as previous Future Leaders programs - with skill development and content explored through modules, online sessions, a residential workshop and mentoring. However, online masterclasses were also incorporated.

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## 2. Objective and Program Elements

The objective of the Program was to support autistic adults to a. enhance leadership related knowledge and skills, and b. enable the development and delivery of grassroots community projects.

The elements of the program were:

- **Five online modules and sessions.** The **online modules** were delivered in a custom e-learning platform, on the topics of: self-discovery and goal setting; leadership; advocacy and influence; wellbeing; and inclusive leadership in autism. The modules included topic-related content and activities, and were written by established leaders in the autism and autistic community. Participants were encouraged to share their learning, ideas, and leadership goal development with other program participants through an e-learning platform discussion forum.

Engagement and learning were supported by the provision of five **online sessions** hosted by the Project Officer. The sessions were recorded and available to participants who were unable to attend, or who wanted to further process content.

- A 3.5-day **in person residential workshop** which extended the theory presented in the online modules and enabled participants to learn about leadership, community development and project management. Participants engaged in:
  - small groups with members of the delivery team to plan and refine their community project goals
  - content sessions on topics including masking, imposter syndrome, community development and systemic advocacy, and
  - question and answer panels with the delivery team which included three Sylvia Rodger Academy alumni.
- A **practical component** in which participants worked on the development and delivery of their community projects. The scope and breadth of participants community projects is highlighted in Appendix A. The practical component was supported by:
  - **masterclasses** delivered online on topics relevant to the Program participants project development and delivery. These included: addressing barriers to project outcomes;

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engaging with online communities and leading online groups; maintaining momentum; and, contracts and consultancy agreements.

- **peer mentoring** on an informal basis and through specific online sessions, and
- **support to develop and/or deliver individual community projects** provided by the Project Officer.

To support participants' wellbeing throughout the program, and their engagement with the program elements, participants completed a **Preparation and Wellbeing Toolkit** developed with a registered psychologist and used in previous Sylvia Roger Academy programs. The Toolkit used self-reflection skill-building prompts to support participants to become familiarised with components of the program, prepare for the residential workshop, and develop a self-advocacy care plan to be used by themselves and/or the delivery team if required.



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## 3. Evaluation

### 3.1 Participants

The participants for evaluation were autistic adults who participated in the program (n=13). The participants were aged over 18 years, and from across Australia.

### 3.2 Method

Program participants completed three fit-for-purpose surveys, administered through Qualtrics.

### 3.3 Results

This section provides evaluation data elicited from program participants. The below section provides overall data, with evaluation of the program elements provided sequentially.

#### Program overall

As shown in table 1 below, all participants rated the program as 'excellent', with the exception of one rating of 'good' ( $\bar{x}$ =3.92). All participants would recommend the program to others ( $\bar{x}$ =3.00) and indicated the program having helped them to: learn about themselves as a leader ( $\bar{x}$ =3.62); develop or reinforce leadership skills ( $\bar{x}$ =3.69); clarify their vision and/or goals ( $\bar{x}$ =3.92); connect with and learn from other autistic people ( $\bar{x}$ =3.92); and, develop their community project ( $\bar{x}$ =3.77).

**Table 1: Program ratings, recommendation and leadership/project related benefit**

	$\bar{x}$ , mode (range) n=13
Program overall*	3.92, 4 (3-4)
Recommend Program to others**	3.00, 3 (3)
<i>To what extent did the program help you to...</i>	
...learn about yourself as a leader***	3.62, 4 (3-4)
...develop or reinforce leadership related skills***	3.69, 4 (3-4)
...clarify your vision and/or goals***	3.92, 4 (3-4)
...connect with and/or learn from other autistic leaders***	3.92, 4 (3-4)
...develop your community project***	3.77, 4 (3-4)

\*scale: 1=poor, 2=okay, 3=good, 4=excellent

\*\*scale: 1=no, 2=unsure, 3=yes

\*\*\*scale= 1=none, 2=a little bit, 3=somewhat, 4=a great deal

Open ended questioning regarding other areas of development enhanced through participation in the program indicated these are including: self-acceptance and self-understanding; validation; confidence; and connection to autistic culture and community. To highlight, three participants said:

**I have grown in my confidence both personally and as a leader, prepared to try things I otherwise may have not attempted, and to put my ideas forward instead of being concerned of being rejected before trying.**

**... leadership is a possibility for the first time in my life, as they have shown me many paths towards personal and community progress.**

**Future Leaders has been a place of validation and acceptance that feels so overdue and needed. I was beginning to wilt and Future Leaders watered me and fertilised me and encouraged me to grow.**

## Online modules and sessions

With regard to the **modules**, the majority of participants completing the survey rated these as ‘excellent’ ( $\bar{x}$ =3.42), as shown in table 2. Analysis of data for the specific modules, also shown in table 2, indicated the majority engaged with ‘most or all’ of the content and activities for modules one to four, and participated in the discussion forum. The majority engaged in ‘most or all’ of the module five content, but did not engage in the activities or discussion forum to the same extent.

**Table 2: Overall rating and extent of engagement with online modules**

$\bar{x}$ , mode (range) n=13					
	Module 1: Self-discovery and Goal Setting	Module 2: Leadership	Module 3: Advocacy and Influence	Module 4: Wellbeing	Module 5: Inclusive Leadership in autism
Read content/activities or watched videos*	3.83, 4 (3-4)	3.83, 4 (3-4)	3.67, 4 (3-4)	3.75, 4 (3-4)	3.42, 4 (1-4)
Completed activities*	4.00, 4 (4)	3.92, 4 (3-4)	3.67, 4 (1-4)	3.67, 4 (3-4)	3.08, - (1-4)
Shared (and/or commented on) responses to activities in the discussion forum*	3.67, 4 (1-4)	3.75, 4 (1-4)	3.50, 4 (1-4)	2.92, 4 (1-4)	2.55, - (1-4)
Overall rating of online modules**	3.42, 4 (2-4)				

\*scale: 1=none, 2=a little bit, 3=some, 4=most or all

\*\*scale: 1=poor, 2=okay, 3=good, 4=excellent

With regard to the five **online sessions**, all participants attended four or five sessions with the majority attending all ( $\bar{x}$ =4.67). All participants specified the online sessions as useful, with qualitative data indicating the benefits of the online sessions as including: being helpful for understanding content; learning about others life experiences; feeling comfortable with other participants prior to the residential workshop; and, experiencing ‘safe autistic space’. To highlight, three participants wrote:

**It was important to put faces to names and have the chance to ask questions and benefit from answers to questions others asked.**

**Enjoyed being able to participate fluidly. Be that text, speech video or just observe.**

**It was helpful to see other people in a similar situation to me. It helped me understand my own story and experience, both in its similarities and its differences.**

## Residential Workshop

Quantitative data indicated high approval ratings for the workshop overall ( $\bar{x}$ =3.46), as shown in table 3. Qualitative data indicated the workshop as conducive with, and valuable to, learning and engagement - as well as significant to identity and connection. As stated:

**The key messages I have received (were) my needs are equal, my needs are important, I am equal, I am important, its ok to find things really hard and still belong... (this is) beneficial on so many levels and help me gain a stronger sense of myself, not just in relationship to my community offering but all of life.**

The majority of participants indicating the individual workshop sessions as 'excellent', as shown in table 3.

**Table 3: Ratings of workshop overall, individual sessions and group sessions**

	$\bar{x}$ , mode (range) n=13
Workshop overall*	3.46, 4 (2-4)
Embracing leadership*	3.85, 4 (3-4)
Inclusive community engagement and representation*	3.77, 4 (3-4)
Building partnerships and networks*	3.92, 4 (3-4)
Marketing a community program and yourself as a leader*	3.54, 4 (1-4)
Q&A Panel with autistic leaders*	3.62, 4 (3-4)
Tracking your progress*	3.62, 4 (3-4)
Finding your champions and nurturing potential leaders*	3.69, 4 (3-4)
Leaving autistic space- self-care and connection*	3.69, 4 (3-4)
Group breakout sessions to discuss project ideas **	2.92, 3 (2-3)

\*scale: 1=poor, 2=okay, 3=good, 4=excellent

\*\*scale: 1=no, 2=unsure, 3=yes

Qualitative data supported the high approval ratings for sessions. As stated by two participants:

... you will walk away learning something new or expanding on your knowledge. The workshops (sessions) also gave you confidence that you were on the right path or gave you new avenues to explore.

The workshops (sessions) were well targeted, well-paced, and the presenters were in their element. It was a good variety of people presenting, and styles, and showcasing how to be authentic.

With regard to group breakout sessions to discuss project ideas (n=3), the majority of participants indicated this as valuable ( $\bar{x}$ =2.92). Qualitative data supported this, with two participants stating:

This was really valuable, not only to get support with our projects but to get to know the leaders and other future leaders more personally.

Was great to have the smaller session and talk with others about community projects.

### Support Practices

With regard to the **Preparation and Wellbeing Toolkit**, participants completing the survey read ‘all’ of the toolkit ( $\bar{x}$ =3.00) with the majority completing at it all ( $\bar{x}$ =2.83) and finding it useful ( $\bar{x}$ =2.58) as shown in table 4.

**Table 4: Engagement with, and Usefulness of, the Preparation and Wellbeing Toolkit**

	$\bar{x}$ , mode (range) n=12
Read the toolkit*	3.00, 3 (3)
Level of completion*	2.83, 3 (2-3)
Usefulness**	2.58, 3 (2-3)

\*scale: 1=none, 2=some, 3=all

\*\*scale: 1=no, 2=somewhat, 3=yes

Qualitative data indicated that completion of the Toolkit by participants as: ‘challenging but important’; validating; and, aided in preparation for the workshop. Three participants said:

**The toolkit was a big moment for me. It was the first time in my life that anyone had meaningfully offered accessibility modifications in a way that felt genuine; like it was offered on the basis of a belief in my potential, rather than a perception of deficit.**

**I have never done this before for myself. It was wonderful to be able to.**

**I will use it in my job and personal life as well. No one has ever asked me to write these kinds of things out. It was validating to be asked and encouraged and modelled through filling it in.**

With regard to **support staff** at the residential workshop, as shown on table 5, all participants indicated having support staff available as ‘beneficial’ whether they utilised them or not ( $\bar{x}$ =3.00). Qualitative data indicated the inclusion as support staff as being ‘invaluable’ and providing comfort and safety in knowing they were available. To highlight, two participants said:

**The support staff were my favourite and most inspiring part.... I can’t see any way this retreat could have been better held by the support people. It was next level.**

**The support staff were invaluable and I appreciated having familiar faces that I could speak to when I needed to**

**Table 5: Residential workshop support staff and therapy dog**

	$\bar{x}$ , mode (range) n=13
Support Staff Beneficial (n=13)	3.00, 3 (3)
Therapy Dog Beneficial (n=12)	2.83, 3 (1-3)

scale: 1=no, 2=somewhat, 3=yes

With regard the inclusion of a **therapy dog**, the majority of participants completing the survey indicated this as ‘beneficial’ whether they utilised him or not ( $\bar{x}$ =2.83), as shown in table 5.

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Qualitative data indicated the benefits as being comforting, grounding and providing regulation.

Two participants said:

**Having (the therapy dog) there brought a sense of comfort and love that only animals can for me**

**I missed my dogs and appreciated the company that dogs offer without social commitment**

With regard to **inclusive and accessibility related practices**, respondents were asked an open-ended question as to which inclusive and accessible practices they found beneficial. These were indicated as including:

- availability of sensory tools
- low lighting
- flexibility of attending sessions
- optional social activities
- flexible seating, including beanbags
- designated regular breaks
- encouraging multi-tasking for those who utilise this for focus e.g. crafting while listening to speakers
- colour coded communication 'dots' to indicate desired level of communication
- live-streaming of sessions so participants could watch from their room.

## **Practical Component**

With regard to **masterclasses**, quantitative data indicated the most valuable as being: contracts and consultancy agreements (n=11); maintaining momentum (n=10); and, addressing barriers to project outcomes (n=9). Qualitative data reflected the value as extending learning and providing clarity. As stated by three participants:

**Excellent information and relevant to my needs. Always helpful to learn from fellow autistics and hear about their success and journeys.**

**It was great learning more about subjects we touched on or had questions raised at the Future Leaders retreat.**

**The recordings provided a valuable way for me to learn from these leaders at my own pace of information processing.**

**Peer mentoring** was facilitated through online group sessions. As shown in table 6, the majority of participants indicated this as valuable ( $\bar{x}$ =2.85).

**Table 6: Peer mentoring and project support**

	$\bar{x}$ , mode (range) n=13
Value of peer mentoring group sessions*	2.85, 3 (2-3)
Support to develop/deliver project**	3.46, 4 (2-4)

\*scale: 1=no, 2=somewhat, 3=yes

\*\*scale: 1=poor, 2=okay, 3=good, 4=excellent

Open ended questions indicated the benefits as including facilitating momentum and connection. As stated by three participants:

**Peer meetings online were helpful. Helped keep connection and momentum with the program.**

**All great, I wanted more of them. I felt heard and it was a safe space to be in.**

**I found these awesome... it was super valuable to feel that connection to the community, and to have the option of checking in in a safe, understanding space when I wanted to.**

The majority of participants (n=10) also indicated that they engaged in peer support or mentoring with other participants outside of the online sessions.

With regard to **support to develop and/or deliver individual community projects**, the majority of participants indicated this as 'excellent' ( $\bar{x}$ =3.46), as shown in table 6. Open ended questioning highlighted this as 'invaluable', with participants wanting more one-on-one sessions with the Project Officer. As stated:



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...I only had one or two .. these were super supportive and really powerful... I didn't have enough contact to really develop a detailed dialogue about what I'm working on, though.

Priceless. More one to one mentorship would be great to add.

The support... enabled me to clarify the concepts I was developing and provided the foundations to which I will always be grateful.

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## 4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Evaluation data indicated that the 2022 Future Leaders Community Projects Program was successfully delivered in line with the objectives. Recommendations for future delivery relate to mentoring and funding of participant projects and are discussed sequentially.

This Community Projects Program utilised peer mentoring, as opposed to formal one-on-one mentoring sessions with established autistic leaders offered in previous iterations of the Future Leaders Program. Although evaluation data indicated engagement in peer mentoring as a valuable component, it was not originally anticipated that this would be supplemented with one-on-one sessions by the Project Officer to support participants development and/or delivery of their community projects. Although the majority of participants indicated this support as 'excellent', it was also indicated that participants wanted more one-on-one sessions. Accordingly, it is recommended that peer support be supplemented with formal one-on-one mentoring sessions with the Project Officer or established autistic leaders.

Although not formally evaluated, it was indicated that a constraint to the delivery of participants community projects was funding. A number of projects, for example, required building and equipment hire and practical resources. While some participants self-funded these, or sought grants, a number had to change the nature and scope of their projects. It is recommended that participants be supported to apply for external funding or money be available for seed-funding of participants projects.

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## Appendix A

Community project ideas developed and/or delivered by participants included:

- Creating and delivering presentations on neuro-affirming practice to professionals who work with autistic people
- Facilitating an art therapy program for autistic people and launching the work at an autistic-led art gallery exhibition
- Developing and delivering acting classes for autistic people, with a focus on building the neurodivergent television and screen actor community
- Creating an online group for neurodivergent allied health professionals to share peer support and best practice
- Creating a LinkedIn group catering to autistic women and non-binary people who want to professionally network and build their careers
- Engaging one-on-one with autistic entrepreneurs to support them to create a business plan
- Facilitating a program for young autistic adults to build life skills and transition into independent housing
- Creating a group to support autistic adults develop self-care skills and positive identity
- Writing a business plan to engage the local community in fundraising for an autistic led eco-village in a regional area.

## Our values



### **Inclusion**

Valuing lived experience



### **Innovation**

Solutions for long term challenges



### **Evidence**

Truth in practice



### **Independence**

Integrity through autonomy



### **Cooperation**

Capturing opportunities together



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