



**Sylvia
Rodger
Academy**



**autism
spectrum**
AUSTRALIA

Future Leaders 2022: Community Projects Program

Executive Summary

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Dr Olivia Gatfield

March 2023



The Sylvia Rodger Academy is an initiative of Autism CRC

autismcrc.com.au

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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

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

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. Future Leaders was first run by Autism CRC in 2018, and subsequently in 2019 and 2020 in partnership with Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect).

The 2022 Future Leaders, also delivered in partnership with Aspect, was tailored for autistic adults who had an idea to improve their community. The Program provided participants with knowledge and support to develop and deliver community-based projects, through various teaching and engagement elements.

This document provides a summary of the evaluation for the 2022 Future Leaders: Community Projects Program. The full report, including descriptions of the Program elements, can be viewed at autismcrc.com.au.

2. Evaluation

To evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of the elements of the Program, fit-for-purpose surveys were developed for participants (n=13).

3. Summary of Findings

Analysis of the data indicated high approval ratings for the program overall, modules and online sessions, the residential workshop and the practical component.

Program overall. The majority of participants rated the program as 'excellent' and all would recommend the program to others. It was indicated that the Program helped them to: learn about themselves as a leader; develop or reinforce leadership skills; clarify their vision and/or goals; connect with and learn from other autistic people; and, develop their community project.

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.

Modules and Online Sessions. The majority of participants completing the survey rated the modules as ‘excellent’ and attended all of the associated online sessions. All participants specified the online sessions as useful, with qualitative data indicating the benefits 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’.

Residential Workshop. Data indicated high approval ratings for the workshop overall, with open-ended questions indicating the workshop as conducive with, and valuable to, learning and engagement - as well as significant to identity and connection. The majority of participants indicated the individual workshop sessions as ‘excellent’, with group breakout sessions to discuss project ideas as ‘valuable’. With regard to residential workshop support practices:

- **Preparation and Wellbeing Toolkit.** All participants read the Toolkit, with the majority indicating it as ‘useful’ and completing it all. Qualitative data highlighting that completion of the Toolkit as: ‘challenging but important’; validating; and, aided in preparation for the workshop.
- **Support staff.** All participants indicated having support staff available as ‘beneficial’ whether they utilised them or not. Qualitative data indicated this as being ‘invaluable’ and providing comfort and safety to know they were available.
- **Therapy dog.** The majority of participants indicated the inclusion of a therapy dog as ‘beneficial’, whether they utilised him or not. Open ended question responses highlighted the benefits as being comforting, grounding and providing regulation.
- **Inclusive and accessibility related practices.** The practices specified as most beneficial were: 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; and, live-streaming of sessions so participants could watch from their room.

Practical Component

- **Masterclasses.** Qualitative data indicated masterclasses as valuable to extend learning and provide clarity.
- **Peer mentoring.** The majority of participants indicated peer mentoring, facilitated through online group sessions, as 'valuable', with benefits including facilitating momentum and connection. The majority also indicated that they engaged in peer support or mentoring with other participants outside of the online sessions.
- **Support to develop and/or deliver individual community projects.** The majority of participants indicated this as 'excellent'. Open ended questioning highlighted this as 'invaluable', with participants wanting more one-on-one sessions with the Project Officer.

4. Recommendations

Evaluation data indicated that the 2022 Future Leaders Community Projects Program was successfully delivered in line with the objectives. Recommendations for future delivery are:

- peer support be supplemented with formal one-on-one mentoring sessions with the Project Officer or established autistic leaders
- participants be supported to apply for external funding or money be available for seed-funding of participants projects.

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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