Research snapshot

May 2020

AutismCRC

# ‘Hear’ to help - Chatbot

Adulthood

## Background

Evidence suggests that young autistic people that continue their education post-secondary school have better life outcomes than their autistic peers.

A recent Australian survey found that students on the autism spectrum who used support systems had a better overall university experience, but that there was low usage of the support systems available.

Reported reasons were both academic and non-academic factors, but reluctance to use support systems was related to previous bad experiences or poor self-advocacy skills.

### Why a chatbot?

A chatbot would allow the student to explore a range of support resources from the comfort of their own phone, potentially improving self-advocacy skills and enhancing the use of available support systems, without increasing the workload of the staff providing support services.

### What is a chatbot?

A chatbot is a natural language processing program that takes utterances and applies a set of rules to derive an appropriate response.

The response is drawn from a ‘brain’, which is developed to contain information relevant to a specific population group.

The chatbot is deployed through an app on a smart device or through a web page.

## Aim

This project aimed to develop a chatbot prototype by building a ‘brain’ using existing resources and refined through conversations with, and feedback from, young adults on the spectrum, their peers and advocates.

## Who took part?

- Curtin Specialist Mentoring Program (CSMP) staff, mentees and mentors
- Autism Academy for Software Quality Assurance (AASQA)
- Wider autism community members recruited through Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect) and the Autism Hub (Department of Education Queensland)
- A Community Advisor oversaw participant engagement

## How we did the research

**Focus groups**

**Remote portals for programming and testing**

**Workshops**

AutismCRC

# ‘Hear’ to help - Chatbot

## What did we find?

This project produced a working chatbot that can be used by students on the autism spectrum and related conditions to facilitate participation in tertiary education.

The chatbot has the following features:

Allows users to navigate social, physical and environmental cues associated with higher education

Provides information on anxiety, depression and university counselling services.

Is available for smart phone or web use and provides relevant resources sourced from student support services and health services

Provides communication strategies for various scenarios, such as asking for an extension or understanding legal rights

## Who did the research?

CSIRO

Curtin University

autism spectrum AUSTRALIA

Queensland Government


### Acknowledgments

The authors would like to acknowledge all participants, especially the mentees and mentors of the Curtin Specialist Mentoring Program (CSMP), members of Autism Academy of Software Quality Assurance (AASQA) and young adults recruited through Autism Hub. Special thanks to Mollie Coles and Saminda Balasuriya. Thanks to Aspect Australia for assisting with recruitment and Autism Hub for actively encouraging recruitment and providing workshop venue and catering.


## Find out more

Download the evaluation report and executive summary on the Autism CRC website:
**autismcrc.com.au/reports/HearToHelp**