



Future Leaders 2018

Evaluation Report

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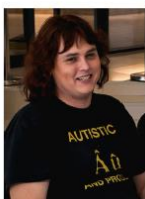
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The authors wish to thank the project team - without whom the development and delivery of the program would not have been possible. The project team were:

- Geraldine Robertson
- Judy Brewer, AO
- Jon Martin
- Malcolm Mayfield
- Dr Olivia Gatfield
- Rochelle Johnson
- Tori Haar
- Dr Wenn Lawson



Above L-R: Olivia Gatfield, Malcolm Mayfield, Tori Haar, Judy Brewer, Wenn Lawson, Geraldine Robertson & Jon Martin.



Left: Rochelle Johnson

We also wish to acknowledge the 14 passionate and talented participants for being a part of the program and continuing to make positive impact in their communities. We also acknowledge the host placement organisations without whose support this program would not have been possible.

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 on the autism spectrum.

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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 co-designed, co-developed and co-delivered with autistic adults, who made up the majority of the project team. Following an open application process, 16 applications were accepted from autistic adults aged 25 to 40 to participate in the 2018 program, with 14 autistic adults completing the program. Attrition being due to external factors, namely health and employment.

2. Objective and Governance

The objectives of the program were to:

- empower young adults on the autism spectrum with leadership potential to build and develop their skills; and,
- support organisations to discover and leverage the strengths of neurodiversity and foster inclusive environments.

To ensure the program met these objectives, governance of the program development and delivery was overseen by a majority autistic project team,

3. Program Elements

There were four key elements to the program:

- Four **online training modules** delivered in a custom e-learning platform, on the topics of: self discovery and goal setting; leadership; advocacy and influence; and, resilience and wellbeing. The modules included topic related content and activities with significant contributions from project team members who were also established leaders in the autism community. Through completion of the modules, participants were encouraged to share their learning, ideas and leadership goal development with other program participants through the e-learning platform discussion forum. Engagement and learning was supported by the provision of online sessions hosted by the module authors.
- A 3.5-day **residential workshop** held in Brisbane. The workshop extended the theory learned in the online modules and enabled participants to learn about, and practice, skills for leadership. Participants engaged in a range of sessions including media training, solution finding workshops, and an activity centred on honing their leadership goals. Content that was taught included leading with integrity and community mindedness.
- A 50 hour **voluntary placement** with a community or corporate organisation. The placements provided practical opportunity for participants to further explore and develop their leadership skills and potential.
- **Mentoring** by project team members in their capacity as established leaders in the autism community. The purpose of which was to support participants through their volunteer placement, as required, and support individual leadership plans.

To support participants' wellbeing throughout the program, and subsequently their engagement with the program elements, a **Preparation and Wellbeing Toolkit** was developed with a registered psychologist. This was designed to enable participants to explore their comfortability with components of the program so they could: plan for how to prepare themselves, reduce concerns and build resilience; and, develop a crisis plan to be used by themselves and/or the project team.

4. Evaluation

4.1 Participants

The participants for evaluation were:

- Autistic adults who participated in the program (n=14). The participants were aged between 25 and 40, and from across Australia.
- Representatives from organisations who provided volunteer placements for participants (n=11)

4.2 Method and Ethics

The method for evaluation for program participants was three fit-for-purpose surveys, administered through Qualtrics at the following timepoints:

- following the residential workshop (Survey 1, n=11)
- upon completion of the program (Survey 2, n=5)
- one year following the program (Survey 3, n=7).

Experiences and opinions of volunteer placement organisations were elicited through survey and 30-minute interviews which adopted a semi-structured protocol.

Ethical clearance for evaluation was obtained from The University of Queensland's Human Research Committee (approval number 2019001888).

4.3 Results

4.3.1 Program participants

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 (Survey 2)

As shown in Table 1 below, all participants completing the survey (n=5) rated the program as 'excellent' (\bar{x} =4.00), and would recommend the program to others (\bar{x} =1.00). In addition, the majority of participants indicated the program as having helped them to: learn about themselves as

a leader (\bar{x} =3.80); develop or reinforce leadership skills (\bar{x} =3.80); clarify their vision and/or goals (\bar{x} =3.60); and, connect with and learn from others (\bar{x} =3.60).

Table 1: Program ratings, recommendation and leadership related benefit

	\bar{x} , mode (range) n=5
Program overall*	4.00, 4 (4)
Recommend Program to others**	1.00, 1 (1)
<i>To what extent did the program help you to...</i>	
...learn about yourself as a leader***	3.80, 4 (3-4)
...develop or reinforce leadership related skills***	3.80, 4 (3-4)
...clarify your vision and/or goals***	3.60, 4 (3-4)
...connect with and/or learn from other autistic leaders***	3.60, 4 (2-4)

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

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

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

Open ended questioning regarding other areas enhanced through participation in the program included: self advocacy; self-identity; confidence; and, personal leadership qualities.

Online modules (Survey 1)

With regard to the online modules, all participants (n=11) rated the online modules as 'good' (n=5) or 'excellent' (n=6, \bar{x} . = 3.73), as shown in Table 2. As also shown, all participants indicated that having modules prior to the workshop as 'beneficial' or 'somewhat beneficial' (\bar{x} . = 2.82).

Table 2: Rating and benefit of online modules

	\bar{x} , mode (range) n=11
Overall rating of online modules*	3.73, 4 (3-4)
Beneficial to have modules prior to residential?**	2.82, 3 (2-3)

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

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

Analysis of data for the specific modules, shown in Table 3, indicated the majority of participants engaged in at least some of the content, activities and related discussion forum for all modules, with the exception of module 4. The most common level of completion of the content, activities and discussion was 'most or all' (mode=4), again, with the exception of module 4.

Table 3: Extent of engagement with online modules

	\bar{x} , mode (range) n=11			
	Module 1 – Self-discovery and Goal Setting	Module 2 - Leadership	Module 3 – Advocacy and Influence	Module 4 - Resilience and Wellbeing
Read content/activities or watched videos	3.73, 4 (3-4)	3.55, 4 (3-4)	3.60, 4 (3-4)	3.27, 4 (2-4)
Completed activities	3.55, 4 (3-4)	3.55, 4 (2-4)	3.45, 4 (2-4)	3.09, 4 (1-4)
Participated in the discussion forum	3.55, 4 (2-4)	3.09, 4 (1-4)	3.09, 4 (1-4)	2.36, 1 (1-4)

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

Preparation and Wellbeing Toolkit (Survey 1)

All participants (n=11) read 'some' or 'all' of the toolkit (\bar{x} =2.82, mode=3), with the majority completing 'some' of the toolkit (\bar{x} =1.91, mode=2), and indicating it as useful (n=9, \bar{x} =2.78, mode=3), as shown on Table 4.

Table 4: Engagement with Preparation and Wellbeing Toolkit

	\bar{x} , mode (range)
Read the toolkit* (n=11)	2.82, 3 (2-3)
Level of completion* (n=11)	1.91, 2 (0-3)
Usefulness** (n=9)	2.78, 3 (2-3)

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

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

Residential Workshop (Survey 1)

All participants (n=11) indicated the workshop as 'good' (n=2) or 'excellent' (n=9, \bar{x} =3.82), with the most common rating for sessions being 'excellent', as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Ratings of workshop sessions

	n	\bar{x} , mode (range)
Leadership and identity	11	3.91, 4 (3-4)
Community mindedness	11	3.82, 4 (3-4)
Leading with integrity	11	3.82, 4 (3-4)
Creating a compelling future	10	3.50, 4 (2-4)
Autistic leader Q&A	11	3.91, 4 (3-4)
Solution finding workshop - small group activities	10	3.70, 4 (3-4)
Solution finding workshop - presentation session	10	3.70, 4 (3-4)
Media training - practice interviews	11	3.91, 4 (3-4)
Media training - group discussion and Q&A	11	3.82, 4 (2-4)

Scale: 1=poor, 2=okay, 3=good, 4=excellent

Open ended question responses indicated enjoyment and engagement was enabled by the supportive practices and processes, such as flexible engagement, promoting autistic space and ensuring participants personal needs were met. As indicated by two participants:

...the environment... for the first time I was able to actively engage in something I really wanted to learn from and take the most I could from it.

I found all sessions quite engaging and I was actively involved in them all. I think this is due to the fact the whole workshop was run in autistic space and we were able to do what we needed... no pressure to participate to a desired level it allowed me to engage how I wanted to...

Voluntary Placement and Mentoring (Survey 2)

All participants (n=5) rated the voluntary placement and mentoring as 'okay', 'good' or 'excellent'- see Table 6. Participants completing the survey engaged in between four and seven sessions with their mentor (\bar{x} =5.60, mode=6), Those who indicated mentoring as 'okay' had the fewest number of sessions with their mentors (n=<5 sessions).

Table 6: Rating and benefit of online modules

	\bar{x} , mode (range) n=5
Volunteer Placement	2.80, 2 (2-4)
Mentoring	3.00, 2 (2-4)

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

One-Year Follow-up (Survey 3)

At one year follow up, the majority of participants completing the survey (n=7) indicated the areas that they have been involved in for the first time, or increased involvement in, as: public speaking or delivering training (n=5, 71%); being part of a board, committee or reference group (n=4, 57%); working with or giving advice to government or community organisations (n=4, 57%); and, writing blogs or media articles (n=4, 57%) – see Table 7.

Table 7: Engagement post-program

	n (%) n=7
Public speaking or delivering a training session	5 (71)
Being part of a board, committee or reference group	4 (57)
Working with or giving advice to government or community organisations	4 (57)
Being a mentor	1 (14)
Getting a new job or starting a business	2 (29)
Volunteering for a new organisation	1 (14)
Being interviewed by the media	1 (14)
Writing blogs or media articles	4 (57)
Sharing about autism through the creative arts	1 (14)

Participants were asked an open-ended question regarding the personal impact of being part of the program. The majority (n=5, 71%) indicated this as growing in self-confidence and self-understanding. As indicated by one participant:

I have grown in personal confidence so much: the impact on my perception of my self-efficacy and ability to effect change is immeasurable.

4.3.2 Volunteer placement host organisations

Surveys were completed by five organisations. The majority indicated the placement benefited their organisation, themselves personally and all would host a placement in the future (Table 8).

Table 8: Perceived benefits

	\bar{x} , mode (range) n=5
Did the volunteer placement benefit your organisation?	1.60, 1 (1-3)
Did the volunteer placement benefit you personally?	1.80, 1 (1-3)
Would you hosting a placement in the future?	1.20, 1 (1-2)

Scale: 1=yes, 2=unsure, 3=no

Rationale for hosting placements in the future were identified as including: to support young adults on the spectrum to gain workplace experience; learning from individuals and using that to benefit others; bringing a 'fresh and unique' perspective; and, sharing of skills. This was reflected in interview data, which was undertaken with seven placement hosts, representing five organisations. The interview data also indicated rationale for provision of placement as: values alignment between the program and the organisation; valuing diversity that autistic people bring as rationale for hosting; and, benefits for the organisation.

Barriers and difficulties during placement provision, and subsequent recommendations, were discussed in interviews as follows:

- More information about the participant prior to placement commencement would be helpful. This was specifically identified with regard to: an understanding of what the participant wants to get out of the experience; their leadership goals; and, their values and strengths. This would then enable organisations to tailor tasks and opportunities for the participant.
- Participants should be provided with information about the organisation so they can ask questions at their first meeting.
- Participants should be encouraged to undertake a site visit to ensure the sensory environment can be tailored to their needs.
- Organisations need to be informed of the mentor/mentee relationship and who they should contact if needed.
- Potential for learning and reflection logs to be completed by participants. This enables a mechanism for placement hosts to ensure expectations are met, and that the participant is learning and acquiring required skills.

- Match between what the organisation can offer and the participants leadership related skill development needs should be considered in-depth. This was identified as being impacted by lead time.
- Organisations should be informed that they should induct participants, including the organisations code of conduct, intellectual property rights (if relevant) and confidentiality.

5. Evaluation Outcomes and Proposed Next Steps

The evaluation data indicated highly successful and appropriate delivery of the program in line with the first objective - to empower young adults on the autism spectrum with leadership potential to build and develop their skills. From the participants completing one year follow up, it was evident that they continue to engage in leadership across a broad range of areas including public speaking and delivering training; and giving advice to government and community organisations.

Feedback from the organisations hosting volunteer placements would indicate that the second objective, being supporting organisations to discover and leverage the strengths of neurodiversity and foster inclusive environments, was met for a number of organisations. However, this needs to be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size. Further, that the majority of organisations participating in the evaluation were autism specific providers, and accordingly, may have a greater understanding of how best to support program participants and leverage their strengths.

As identified through interviews with organisations, in order to provide outcomes in-line with the program objectives, perhaps further consideration should be given to 'matching' potential opportunities within organisations with participant's leadership goals and the personal and practical skills they need to develop to reach these goals. This would involve further refinement of goals and skills prior to organisation placement. This could be facilitated through mentoring at the workshop, which is then continued during placement experiences. A more flexible approach to placements, such as allowing a number of hours to be spent doing activities that support personal and practical skill development, rather than activities within a corporate organisation, may also enhance leadership outcomes.

Last, it is recommended that to further enhance meaningful opportunities, consideration be given to providing placement organisations with a suite of supporting documents and/or checklists which includes:

- details of the mentor/mentee relationship and contacts;

-
- suggestions for first meeting - discussing code-of-conduct, confidentiality and intellectual property rights;
 - benefits of site visit prior to engagement; and
 - provision of information about the organisation in advance.

Similarly, that participants are encouraged to complete learning and/or reflection logs throughout placement experience and provide their placement host with information in advance regarding what they hope to achieve through the experience; their goals and strengths; and, potentially their values.



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