



**Sylvia
Rodger
Academy**



**autism
spectrum**
AUSTRALIA

Future Leaders 2019

Executive Summary

Ainslie Robinson

Olivia Gatfield

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AutismCRC



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The Sylvia Rodger Academy is an initiative of Autism CRC, which receives funding from the Australian Government.

autismcrc.com.au

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Autism CRC

Autism CRC manages the Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (the world's first national, cooperative research effort focused on autism), for which it receives funding from the Australian Government. 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.

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 is delivering Future Leaders in partnership with Autism CRC in 2019 and 2020. 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'.

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. Building upon the concept of the 2013 Future Leaders delivery, the program was revised and expanded on to include a holistic approach to training and development. The expanded program was co-developed with, and co-delivered by, a majority autistic project team to 14 autistic adults aged 25-40 in 2018. Based on evaluation, elements of the program were modified and re-delivered to 15 autistic adults in 2019, with no upper age limit.

2. Objective and Governance

The objective of the program was to empower adults on the autism spectrum with leadership potential to build and develop their skills. To ensure the program met these objectives, the program was governed in development and delivery by a majority autistic project team.

3. Program Elements

The elements of the program included:

- Four **online training modules** delivered in a custom e-learning platform. Engagement and learning was supported by the provision of online sessions hosted by the module authors.
- A 3.5-day **residential workshop** held in Sydney. The workshop extended the theory learned in the online modules and enabled participants to learn about, and practice, skills for leadership.
- A 50 hour **voluntary practical experience project** based on the participant's individual leadership goals.
- **Mentoring** by established leaders in the autism community.

To support participants' wellbeing throughout the program, and their engagement with the program elements, a **Preparation and Wellbeing Toolkit** was developed with a registered psychologist.

4. Evaluation Description

The participants for evaluation were autistic adults who participated in the program (n=15), with the method being three fit-for-purpose surveys, administered through Qualtrics.

5. Summary of Findings

All participants rated the program as 'good' (n=2) or 'excellent' (n=9), and all would recommend the program to others. The majority indicated the program as having helped them to: learn about themselves as a leader, develop or reinforce leadership skills, clarify their vision and/or goals, and connect with and learn from others. With regard to specific program elements:

- **Online modules:** all participants (n=14) rated the online modules as 'good' (n=6) or 'excellent' (n=8) with the majority of participants engaging in 'most or all' of the content, activities and related discussion forum for each module.
- **Preparation and Wellbeing Toolkit:** all participants completing the relevant survey (n=14) read 'some' or 'all' of the Toolkit, with the majority completing 'all' of it and indicating it as useful (n=12).
- **Residential workshop:** all participants (n=14) indicated the workshop as 'good' (n=1) or 'excellent' (n=13) with the most common rating for individual sessions being 'excellent'.
- **Practical experience and mentoring:** most participants rated the practical experience 'good' (n=2) or 'excellent' (n=6), and rated mentoring 'okay' (n=5), 'good' (n=2) or 'excellent' (n=4).

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The evaluation data indicated that the Future Leaders program was highly successfully, and met the program objective. However, while the breadth and scope of the practical experience component (see Appendix A) undertaken by the Future Leaders, as well as the evaluation data, indicate this as a successful modification from the 2018 delivery – it is recommended that scaffolding and guiding templates be developed to support future participants who may benefit from more structure. Further, it is recommended that the mentoring component be enhanced by setting the first mentee-mentor meeting at the residential workshop and reinforcing to participants that mentors are being compensated for their time.

7. Appendix A

Some of the practical experience undertaken by Future Leaders included:

- Collaborated with a local TAFE and an Occupational Therapist to create presentations on autism awareness, with the intention to deliver to TAFE students later in 2020.
- Organised and ran an inclusive all abilities beach day with their local community's Surf Life Saving club. They are now continuing to work to make their Surf Life Saving Club more inclusive in general.
- Created a flyer on autism and mental health to raise awareness of the extremely high rates of mental health disorder in the autistic community, and what professionals and services need to do to more effectively communicate with autistic people. Presented at a State-based mental health conference and undertook speaking and meetings with a mental health organisation, suicide prevention reference groups and systemic advocacy organisations.
- Applied for and was awarded the Vice Chancellor's Award for Inclusion and Diversity at their University. They are using the prize money to develop trans/gender diversity training for the Universities medical staff and resource an on-campus autistic retreat space.
- Developed autism and trauma resources for their State's Education Department.
- Wrote and presented poetry on neurodiversity and spoke on a writing panel regarding the contextual basis within disability culture.
- Developed a long-term art project aiming to feature the art of autistic students in their State.
- Met with a number of leading academics to discuss the need for research on autism and Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder
- With a focus on employment outcomes for autistic people, co-presented two workshops on "inclusive volunteering of people with disabilities", presented a workshop on public speaking for clients of an autism service provider and met with a local MP to propose a Federal Government Initiative for a National Disability Employment Awareness Month.
- Facilitated a placement with an Artistic Director to learn the skills to establish an inclusive theatre company.