



**Sylvia
Rodger
Academy**



**autism
spectrum**
AUSTRALIA

Future Leaders 2019

Evaluation Report

Ainslie Robinson

Olivia Gatfield

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Ainslie Robinson

Project Officer, Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect)

Dr Olivia Gatfield

Executive Officer, Sylvia Rodger Academy, Autism CRC

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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'.

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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 autistic 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.

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, 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, and were written by 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 Sydney. The workshop extended the theory learned in the online modules and enabled participants to learn about, and practice, skills for leadership. Participants also engaged in small group workshops with their mentors to plan and refine their personal leadership goals.
- A 50 hour **voluntary practical experience project** based on the participant's individual leadership goals. The project provided practical opportunity for participants to commence working towards their leadership goals with the support of established autism leaders and their peers. The scope and breadth of the practical experience projects undertaken is highlighted in Appendix A.
- **Mentoring** by established leaders in the autism community. The purpose of which was to support participants through their practical experience projects and aid in refinement of participants leadership goals and 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 enabled participants to get comfortable 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=15). The participants were aged over 18 years, and from across Australia.

4.2 Method

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

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

As shown in Table 1 below, all participants completing the survey (n=11) rated the program as 'good' (n=2) or 'excellent' (n=9) (\bar{x} =3.82), and would recommend the program to others (\bar{x} =4.00). In addition, the majority of participants indicated the program as having helped them to: learn about themselves as a leader (\bar{x} =3.64); develop or reinforce leadership skills (\bar{x} =3.55); clarify their vision and/or goals (\bar{x} =3.73); and, connect with and learn from others (\bar{x} =3.82).

Table 1: Program ratings, recommendation and leadership related benefit

	\bar{x} , mode (range) n=11
Program overall*	3.82, 4 (3-4)
Recommend Program to others**	4.00, 4 (4)
<i>To what extent did the program help you to...</i>	
...learn about yourself as a leader***	3.64, 4 (3-4)
...develop or reinforce leadership related skills***	3.55, 4 (3-4)
...clarify your vision and/or goals***	3.73, 4 (3-4)
...connect with and/or learn from other autistic leaders***	3.82, 4 (3-4)

*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 of development enhanced through participation in the program included: self-acceptance/self-identity; confidence; and, connectedness.

Online modules

With regard to the online modules, all participants (n=14) rated the online modules as ‘good’ (n=6) or ‘excellent’ (n=8, \bar{x} =3.57), 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} =2.93).

Table 2: Rating and benefit of online modules

	\bar{x} , mode (range) n=11
Overall rating of online modules*	3.57, 4 (3-4)
Beneficial to have modules prior to residential? **	2.93, 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 ‘most or all’ of the content, activities and related discussion forum for each module (mode=4).

Table 3: 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 - Resilience and Wellbeing
Read content/activities or watched videos	3.92, 4 (3-4)	3.92, 4 (3-4)	3.92, 4 (3-4)	3.85, 4 (3-4)
Completed activities	3.85, 4 (3-4)	3.92, 4 (3-4)	3.85, 4 (3-4)	3.77, 4 (3-4)
Participated in the discussion forum	3.77, 4 (2-4)	3.77, 4 (2-4)	3.62, 4 (2-4)	3.46, 4 (2-4)

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

Preparation and Wellbeing Toolkit

All participants (n=14) read ‘some’ or ‘all’ of the toolkit (\bar{x} =2.93), with the majority completing ‘all’ of the toolkit (n=9, \bar{x} =2.5), and indicating it at least somewhat useful (n=12, \bar{x} =2.58), as shown on Table 4.

Table 4: Engagement with Preparation and Wellbeing Toolkit

	\bar{x} , mode (range)
Read the toolkit* (n=14)	2.93, 3 (2-3)
Level of completion* (n=14)	2.5, 3 (1-3)
Usefulness** (n=12)	2.58, 3 (1-3)

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

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

Residential Workshop

All participants (n=14) indicated the workshop as ‘good’ (n=1) or ‘excellent’ (n=13, \bar{x} =3.93), with the most common rating for sessions being ‘excellent’, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Ratings of workshop sessions

	\bar{x} , mode (range) n=14
Leadership and identity	3.93, 4 (3-4)
Introduction to advocacy part 1 - Systemic advocacy and community mindedness	3.85, 4 (3-4)
Introduction to advocacy part 2 - Self advocacy	3.93, 4 (3-4)
Autistic leader Q&A	4.00, 4 (4)
Mentoring sessions	3.57, 4 (2-4)
Advocacy tools part 1 - Public speaking	3.79, 4 (3-4)
Advocacy tools part 2 - Traditional/social media	3.79, 4 (3-4)
Future Leader presentations	3.93, 4 (3-4)

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

Open ended question responses indicated that the residential workshop was an opportunity for participants to deeply connect with autistic peers, enabled by provision of autistic space and adept project staff. As indicated by two participants:

I thought the residential was the best experience I ever had. Autistic Space is very special. The mentors were fabulous and all staff were incredibly supportive and helpful. Thanks everyone.

I loved this opportunity. One of the most valuable experiences of my life I can say with full conviction. A full tribe of experiences, empathy and understanding which was invaluable in providing ongoing support....

Practical Experience and Mentoring

Most participants rated the practical experience 'good' (n=2) or 'excellent' (n=6, \bar{x} =3.30). All participants rated the mentoring as 'okay' (n=5), 'good' (n=2) or 'excellent' (n=4, \bar{x} =2.91) - see Table 5.

Table 5: Rating and benefit of online modules

	\bar{x} , mode (range)
Practical experience (n=10)	3.30, 4 (1-4)
Mentoring (n=11)	2.91, 2 (2-4)

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

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Evaluation data indicated that the Future Leaders program was highly successfully, and delivered in line with the program objective – being to empower autistic adults with leadership potential to build and develop their skills.

Modification to the program for 2019 delivery included a voluntary practical experience project, and commencement of small group mentoring sessions at the residential workshop. With regard to the practical experience project, the evaluation data and the varied scope and breadth of projects (see Appendix A) suggests that providing an opportunity to undertake a practical project based on individualised goals was successful. With regard to commencement of mentoring at the residential workshop, informal feedback from the Project Team and participant evaluation data suggests that this is also a valuable modification. It is considered that this facilitated openness between mentors and mentees, peer-to-peer support and feedback, and an opportunity for a variety of mentors to work with, and provide support for, mentees in their area of skill.

Although the 2019 model of the Future Leaders program was successful, there is room for improvement in its delivery. The practical component of the program was intentionally left very broad to enable an individualisation with regard to leadership development needs and goals. However, it has been noted that some participants may benefit from more structure in this component and accordingly, scaffolding and guiding templates should be developed. With regard to mentoring, parameters for this component should include setting the first mentoring session at the residential workshop and reinforcing that mentors are being compensated for their time and accordingly, mentees should not be concerned about ‘encroaching on their time’.

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.