Future Leaders 2020

Evaluation Report

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The Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (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, 2020 and 2021. 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 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.

In 2020, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Future Leaders Program was delivered entirely online - incorporating online modules, a virtual workshop and online mentoring by established autistic leaders.

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:

- Five **online training modules** delivered in a custom e-learning platform, on the topics of: self-discovery and goal setting; leadership; advocacy and influence; resilience and wellbeing; and, diversity within autism. 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 day **virtual workshop** with an additional presentation day held remotely over Zoom. The workshop extended the theory learned in the online modules and enabled participants to learn about leadership and associated skills. Participants engaged in small groups with their mentors to plan and refine their personal leadership goals. Additional content was developed for the virtual workshop that had not been provided in previous years, such as the addition of international Autistic speaker Dawn-Joy Leung and question and answer panels with past Sylvia Rodger Academy Future Leaders alumni. To facilitate peer-to-peer engagement and incidental learning, optional social activities were for provided of an evening, along with 'virtual dinner' and a drop-in room to socialise during breaks.
- 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.
- **Mentoring** by established leaders in the autism community. The purpose of which was to support participants through their practical experience projects.

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 and Ethics

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

4.3 Results

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=8) rated the program as 'okay' (n=3) or 'excellent' (n=5) ($\overline{x}$=3.25). Most participants would recommend the program to others (n=6) and indicated the program having significantly helped them to: learn about themselves as a leader ($\overline{x}$=3.13); develop or reinforce leadership skills ($\overline{x}$=3.25); clarify their vision and/or goals ($\overline{x}$=3.13); and, connect with and learn from others ($\overline{x}$=3.13).

Table 1: Program ratings, recommendation, and leadership related benefit

	$\bar{x}$, mode (range) n=8
Program overall*	3.25, 4 (2-4)
Recommend Program to others**	2.75, 3 (2-3)
To what extend did the program help you to…	
…learn about yourself as a leader***	3.13, 4 (1-4)
…develop or reinforce leadership related skills***	3.25, 4 (1-4)
…clarify your vision and/or goals***	3.13, 4 (1-4)
…connect with and/or learn from other autistic leaders***	3.13, 4 (1-4)

*scale: 1=poor, 2=okay, 3=good, 4=excellent
**scale: 1=no, 2=unsure, 3=yes
***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: advocacy; confidence; and, connectedness.

Online modules

With regard to the online modules, most participants (n=14) rated the online modules as 'good' (n=4) or 'excellent' (n=7), as shown in Table 2. As also shown, all participants indicated that having modules prior to the workshop as 'beneficial' (n=12) or 'somewhat beneficial' (n=2, $\bar{x}$.= 2.86).

Table 2: Rating and benefit of online modules

	$\bar{x}$, mode (range) n=14
Overall rating of online modules*	3.29, 4 (2-4)
Beneficial to have modules prior to workshop?**	2.86, 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 most participants engaged in the majority of the content, activities and related discussion forum for all modules. The most common level of completion of the content, activities and discussion was 'most or all' (mode=4).

Table 3: Extent of engagement with online modules

	Module 1 – Self-discovery and Goal Setting	Module 2 - Leadership	Module 3 – Advocacy and Influence	Module 4 - Resilience and Wellbeing	Module 5 – Diversity Within Autism
	$\bar{x}$, mode (range)				
Read content/activities or watched videos	n=14 3.86, 4 (3-4)	n=13 3.85, 4 (3-4)	n=13 3.77, 4 (3-4)	n=13 3.62, 4 (3-4)	n=13 3.62, 4 (1-4)
Completed activities	n=12 3.75, 4 (2-4)	n=13 3.83, 4 (3-4)	n=12 3.83, 4 (3-4)	n=12 3.50, 4 (3-4)	n=12 3.50, 3/4 (3-4)
Participated in the discussion forum	n=13 3.69, 4 (1-4)	n=12 3.46, 4 (1-4)	n=13 3.31, 3 (2-4)	n=13 2.85, 3 (1-4)	n=13 2.92, 3/4 (1-4)

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 ($\bar{x}$=2.79, mode=3), with the majority completing at least some of the toolkit ($\bar{x}$=2.29, mode=2,3), and indicating it as at least somewhat useful ($\bar{x}$=2.55, mode=3), as shown on Table 4.

Table 4: Engagement with Preparation and Wellbeing Toolkit

	$\bar{x}$, mode (range)
Read the toolkit* (n=14)	2.79, 3 (2-3)
Level of completion* (n=14)	2.29, 2,3 (1-3)
Usefulness** (n=12)	2.5, 3 (2-3)

*scale: 1=none, 2=some, 3=all
**scale: 1=no, 2=somewhat, 3=yes

Virtual Workshop

Most participants (n=14) indicated the workshop as 'good' (n=2) or 'excellent' (n=9), ($\bar{x}$=3.36), with the most common rating for sessions being 'excellent', as shown in Table 5. There was an

increase in 'poor', 'okay' and 'good' ratings (as opposed to 'excellent') for the 2019 delivery of the Program, with comments detailing the online workshop delivery as a rationale for their ratings.

Table 4: Ratings of workshop sessions

	n	$\bar{x}$, mode (range)
Leadership and identity	11	3.36, 4 (1-4)
Introduction to advocacy part 1 - Systemic Advocacy and Community Mindedness	11	3.45, 4 (1-4)
Autistic leader Panel 1	11	3.36, 4 (1-4)
Introduction to advocacy part 2 - Self Advocacy	11	3.27, 4 (1-4)
Advocacy tools - Public Speaking	11	3.55, 4 (1-4)
Autistic leader Panel 2	11	3.55, 4 (1-4)
Vulnerability and leadership	11	3.36, 4 (1-4)
International Speaker	10	3.20, 4 (1-4)
Mentoring (throughout the virtual workshop)	11	3.27, 4 (1-4)
Future Leader presentations	9	3.44, 4 (1-4)

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

Most of the open-ended question responses spoke to the mode of delivery in terms of a virtual workshop. Most participants found the online workshop more challenging than a face-to-face workshop would have been, however one participant believed holding the workshop online made it more accessible. As indicated by two participants:

> **It was what it was, it doesn't replace real world, and it is more debilitating and it is more draining.**

> **It was wonderful from an accessibility perspective.**

Practical Experience and Mentoring

With regard to the practical experience, the majority of participants completing the survey indicated this as 'okay' (mode=2, $\bar{x}$=2.38), see table 5. Not all participants, however, commenced or completed this self-directed component of the Program. The practical experience projects undertaken by participants included:

- Creating and delivering a presentation on the inclusion of autistic students to professionals who provide learning and resources to those who support and advocate for young children on the spectrum.
- Developing their profile as an Autistic researcher, leader and advocate in academia and autism research, starting with their local research community. This included developing ways to self-care and building strategies around dealing with emotionally triggering terminology, as well as continuing to expand their leadership skills.
- Investigating current employment programs for autistic adults in the local government sector as part of a long-term project to develop an autistic employment program.
- Developed and delivered autism awareness presentation to State Emergency Services.
- Networking with State peak autism service provider agency and undertaking observations of programs that support transition to work.

Table 5: Rating and benefit of online modules

	$\bar{x}$, mode (range) n=8
Practical experience (n=8)	2.38, 2 (1-4)
Mentoring (n=8)	2.63, 4 (1-4)

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

With regard to mentoring, the majority of participants completing the survey rated this as "excellent" (mode=4, $\bar{x}$=2.63). Responses to open-ended questioning included

> **Mentoring was excellent, I learnt so much - not only about my practical component but also about myself and other ways that I have implemented in my personal and work life.**
>
> **The mentoring component was amazing!**

The participants who did not rate the mentoring component highly either did not try to access mentoring; indicated they were unable to get in contact with their mentor; or would have preferred more guidance.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Evaluation data indicated that the Future Leaders program was successfully delivered in line with the objectives, particularly given the constraints and unpredictability due to COVID-19.

However, the data suggests that delivering the Future Leaders Program entirely online- which was required due to the pandemic- was not a positive change to the Program. While the survey responses to the online modules was consistent with previous years, the feedback regarding the other components (workshop, practical component and mentoring) was less favourable than past Program delivery.

This suggests, firstly, that a virtual workshop is not sufficient for participants to grow their skills and connect with their peers, and that an in-person workshop is needed for participants to build relationships with each other and engage effectively in the Program. Secondly, that the face-to-face experience of a residential workshop provides momentum to continue the self-directed elements of the program – being the practical component and one-to-one mentoring for which participants are responsible for delivering and scheduling.

While the value of having a face-to-face component is clear, this may not always be viable. Accordingly, it is recommended that participants selected for the Program have demonstrated comfortability with, and ability to use, Zoom or other online meeting software. Further, have demonstrated a level of resilience to ensure they continue to engage with the elements of the Program. Last, that if a virtual workshop is required:

- state-based 'meet ups' be offered, if possible
- the workshop is held over half-days, rather than full days of content and activities
- peer-to-peer networking activities are made compulsory.