



**Sylvia
Rodger
Academy**



**autism
spectrum**
AUSTRALIA

Future Leaders 2020

Executive Summary

Ainslie Robinson

Ashton Bartz

Dr 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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Evaluation Report

Ainslie Robinson

Project Officer, Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect)

Ashton Bartz

Project Officer, Sylvia Rodger Academy

Dr Olivia Gatfield

Executive Officer, Sylvia Rodger Academy

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The Future Leaders 2020 participants and Project Team

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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. 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. 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. 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.
- 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 and Summary of Findings

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.

All participants completing the survey (n=8) rated the program as 'okay' (n=3) or 'excellent' (n=5) (\bar{x} =3.25) and most would recommend the program to others (n=6). The majority indicated the program having significantly helped them to: learn about themselves as a leader (\bar{x} =3.13); develop or reinforce leadership skills (\bar{x} =3.25); clarify their vision and/or goals (\bar{x} =3.13); and, connect with and learn from others (\bar{x} =3.13). With regard to specific program elements:

- **Online modules:** most participants (n=14) rated the online modules as 'good' (n=4) or 'excellent' (n=7), with all participants indicating having modules prior to the workshop as 'beneficial' (n=12) or 'somewhat beneficial' (n=2). 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'.
- **Preparation and Wellbeing Toolkit:** all participants (n=14) read 'some' or 'all' of the toolkit, with the majority completing at least some and indicating it as at least somewhat useful.
- **Virtual Workshop:** most participants (n=14) indicated the workshop as 'good' (n=2) or 'excellent' (n=9), with the most common rating for sessions being 'excellent'.
- **Practical Experience and Mentoring:** the majority of participants rated the practical experience as 'okay' and the mentoring as 'excellent'.

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.