Governance Program 2019

Evaluation Report

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Acknowledgements

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- Ashton Bartz
- Judy Brewer
- Malcolm Mayfield
- Dr Olivia Gatfield
- Peter Davey
- Rachel McNamara
- Dr Shirley Lanning

Above L-R: Malcolm Mayfield, Dr Olivia Gatfield, Dr Shirley Lanning, Ashton Bartz, Peter Davey & Rachel McNamara.

Insert: Judy Brewer

The authors would also like to thank the 14 passionate and talented participants for being a part of the inaugural Governance Program.

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.

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

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

An initiative of the Autism CRC, the Sylvia Rodger Academy delivers nationwide programs aimed at empowering autistic adults. As of 2020, the Sylvia Rodger Academy has established and delivered three Programs – the Research Program (2015, 2017, 2020), the Future Leaders Program (2018, 2019, 2020) and the Governance Program (2019-2020).

The Governance Program is the first national training program in corporate governance for autistic adults, enabling leadership in decision-making and capturing the strength of diverse thinking to make a broader contribution to the corporate and government sectors.

The Governance Program was created and launched in 2019, with our pilot Program running from late 2019 to late 2020. The Program was co-designed and co-delivered with autistic adults, with four of the seven Project Team members identifying as autistic. Following an open application process, 15 applications were accepted from autistic adults aged 25 to 59 to participate in the 2019 Program, with 14 of those applicants completing the program.

2. Objective and Governance

The objectives of the Program were to:

- increase the engagement of autistic adults in organisational decision-making
- establish a national network of autistic people with governance skills, enabling them to share experiences and opportunities
- provide participants with practical knowledge and experience and develop skills
- improve participants' understanding of governance structures and different organisational models.

To ensure the Program met these objectives, development and delivery was undertaken by a majority autistic Project Team, with four of the seven Project Team members identifying as autistic. To ensure the Program was relevant to corporate governance, five of the seven members had corporate governance experience and were either current or former company directors.

3. Program Elements

Participants in the Governance Program developed practical knowledge and experience in corporate governance through three key training and development initiatives, being:

1. Five **online training modules** delivered in a custom built e-learning platform on the topics of:

   - Introduction to Corporate Governance
   - Director's Duties and Responsibilities
   - Risk and Strategy
   - Financial Literacy
   - Board Effectiveness.

   The modules included topic-related content, videos and activities, and were written by an autistic Project Team member with significant corporate governance experience. Through the completion of the modules, participants were encouraged to share their ideas and completed activities with other Program participants through the custom built e-learning platform discussion forum. Engagement and learning was supported by running fortnightly online sessions hosted by members of the Project Team, with a total of five online sessions held.

2. A **3.5-day/3-night residential workshop** held in Melbourne. The workshop extended the theory learned in the online modules and enabled participants to learn about, and practice, corporate governance skills. Participants engaged in a range of activities including: mock board meetings; sessions on topics such as financial literacy, risk, chairing meetings and strategic planning, and; question and answer panels with current and former board directors.

3. A **board observation** of one or two board meetings with organisations in Autism CRC's network. The placements provided a practical opportunity for participants to observe a board in action and to further develop their corporate governance skills. Participants were also provided with a reflection task to complete after their board observation to consolidate their learning. Participants could complete these via written submission or in virtual meetings with up to five other participants enabling them to hear about different experiences.

To support participants' wellbeing throughout the Program, a **Preparation and Wellbeing Toolkit** was developed. This enabled participants to explore the components of the Program and a) plan for how to reduce concerns and prepare themselves, and b) develop a crisis plan to be used by themselves and/or residential workshop support staff.

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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 59, and from across Australia.

4.2 Method

The method for evaluation was two fit-for-purpose surveys, administered through Qualtrics at the following times:

- following the residential workshop (Survey 1, n=10)
- upon completion of the program (Survey 2, n=7).

4.3 Results

4.3.1 Program overall (Survey 2)

The Program participants completing this survey (n=7) all rated the overall Program as 'excellent' ($\bar{x}$=4), and would recommend the Governance Program to other autistic adults. These results can be viewed in Table 1.

Table 1: Rating and recommendation of the Governance Program

	$\bar{x}$, mode (range) n=7
Overall rating of the Governance Program*	4, 4 (0)
Would you recommend the Governance Program to other autistic adults?**	2, 2 (0)

*Scale: 1=Poor, 2=Okay, 3=Good, 4=Excellent
**Scale: 1=No, 2=Yes

Graduates were also positive about the outcomes they achieved upon completion of the Governance Program. Participants said they 'learned and developed corporate governance skills' and were 'provided with practical knowledge and governance experience' either 'somewhat' (n=1) or 'a great deal' (n=6, $\bar{x}$=3.86). All participants said that the Program 'improved their understanding of governance structures and organisational models' 'a great deal' (n=7, $\bar{x}$=4). These results can be viewed in Table 2.

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Table 2: Outcomes from the Governance Program

	$\bar{x}$, mode (range) n=7		
	…learn or develop corporate governance skills?	…provide you with practical knowledge and governance experience?	…improve your understanding of governance structures and organisational models?
To what extent did the Program…	3.86, 4 (1)	3.86, 4 (1)	4.00, 4 (0)

Scale: 1=None, 2=A little bit, 3=Somewhat, 4=A great deal

Participants who recorded additional comments discussed their achievements since completing the Governance Program, or discussed ways in which the Program had otherwise benefited them.

> **Since the Governance Program, I now sit on two committees, one council and have just applied for my first board appointment.**

Some participants (n=4) noted that they had an increase in confidence following graduation from the Governance Program.

> **I am confident now that I am well equipped with well-rounded knowledge that the Program has given me. I've also learnt a lot about what board participation looks like and have been inspired by other participants and their experiences. I feel well placed to seek out a board position.**

> **The Governance Program gave me the confidence to apply for roles that I would not have attempted prior to the Program. I feel equipped to apply for and commit to these roles now. Thank you for believing in us and for giving us the opportunity to grow our skills.**

4.3.2 Online modules (Survey 1)

Overall, the Program participants (n=10) rated the online modules as either 'okay' (n=1), 'good' (n=1), or 'excellent' (n=7, $\bar{x}$ =3.67), with one participant leaving the question blank (n=1). All participants indicated that having modules prior to the workshop was 'helpful' ($\bar{x}$= 3). These results can be viewed in Table 3.

Table 3: Rating and helpfulness of online modules

	$\overline{x}$, mode (range) n=9
Overall rating of online modules*	3.67, 4 (2)
Helpful to have the modules prior to residential?**	3.00, 3 (0)

*Scale: 1=Poor, 2=Okay, 3=Good, 4=Excellent
**Scale: 1=No, 2=Somewhat, 3=Yes

All the participants (n=10) indicated that they read/watched 'most or all' of the content, activities and/or videos for all five of the modules. The most common level of completion of the content, activities and discussion was 'most or all' (mode=4), as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Engagement with online modules

	$\overline{x}$, mode (range) n=10				
	Module 1 – Introduction to Corporate Governance	Module 2 – Director's Duties and Responsibilities	Module 3 – Risk and Strategy	Module 4 – Financial Literacy	Module 5 – Board Effectiveness
Read content, read activities and/or watched videos	4.00, 4 (0)	4.00, 4 (0)	4.00, 4 (0)	4.00, 4 (0)	4.00, 4 (0)
Completed activities	4.00, 4 (0)	4.00, 4 (0)	3.90, 4 (1)	3.60, 4 (2)	3.70, 4 (3)
Shared (and/or commented on) responses to activities on discussion forum	3.80, 4 (2)	3.80, 4 (2)	3.60, 4 (2)	3.50, 4 (3)	3.50, 4 (3)

Scale: 1=None, 2=A little bit, 3=Some, 4=Most or all

Participants who recorded additional comments noted that they found the online modules easy-to-read, and that the structured content, extra resources and being able to work at their own pace was helpful.

> **I really enjoyed the online modules and the learning environment. I felt safe to share challenges I had with the financial literacy module because I was supported by the Project Team and my peers throughout the experience. I enjoyed reading everyone's contributions to the discussions and I learned so much. The content was easy to access and logical in its order. The extra resources available were excellent.**

4.3.3 Online sessions (Survey 1)

Half of the participants (n=5) attended all five of the online sessions ($\overline{x}$=2.90). The remaining half either attended most of the sessions (n=1) or didn't attend any of the sessions (n=4). Instead,

these participants watched recordings of either 'some' or 'all' of the online sessions ($\bar{x}$=2.60), as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Engagement with online sessions

	$\bar{x}$, mode (range)
Number of online sessions attended (n=10)	2.90, 5 (5)
Watched the recordings* (n=5)	2.60, 3 (1)

*Scale: 1=No, 2=Some, 3=Yes

Participants who recorded additional comments suggested that they enjoyed attending the online sessions. Highlights for participants regarding the online sessions included getting to meet others, ask questions and be a part of discussions with their fellow participants.

> **I really enjoyed the online sessions. From a content perspective, they were a good opportunity to get clarity around things that I might not have fully understood from the online modules, and to hear other peoples' perspectives on things. Just as importantly, it was a chance to chat to other participants in the Program and get to know people before the residential, which made the residential so much more comfortable. And it was a little bit of autistic space in my life every fortnight which was lovely!**

Participants who were unable to attend all the sessions noted that it was due to time constraints (n=3), being overstimulated on the day (n=1) or preferring to watch recordings (n=1). These participants found watching the session recordings to be beneficial.

> **It was so helpful for me to be able to watch what I had missed and catch up on the conversations. This is an opportunity we don't normally get when we have had to miss an experience firsthand.**

4.3.4 Preparation and Wellbeing Toolkit (Survey 1)

All participants participating in survey one (n=10) read 'some' or 'all' of the toolkit ($\bar{x}$=2.80, mode=3), with the majority completing 'some' of the toolkit ($\bar{x}$=1.90, mode=2), and indicating it as useful (n=7, $\bar{x}$=2.57, mode=3), as shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Engagement with Preparation and Wellbeing Toolkit

	$\bar{x}$, mode (range)
Read the toolkit* (n=10)	2.80, 3 (2)
Level of completion* (n=10)	1.90, 2 (2)
Usefulness** (n=7)	2.57, 3 (1)

*Scale: 1=No, 2=Some of it, 3=All of it
**Scale: 1=No, 2=Somewhat, 3=Yes

Participants who recorded additional comments noted that it was useful for self-reflection, and that they may not have needed the Toolkit but still saw it as a necessary tool to have.

> **I've been to plenty of events like the residential before and I have a pretty good idea of how I cope and what I need (and the Autism CRC team are pretty good with knowing how to support me), so I don't think I really needed to complete it. I do think it would have been interesting to do if I'd had the time, though, because it's always useful to sit down and deliberately think about your wellbeing etc.**

> **Great thing to have. I didn't need all of it but I think it's essential as an option.**

4.3.5 Residential Workshop (Survey 1)

All participants (n=10) thought the workshop was 'good' (n=1) or 'excellent' (n=9, $\bar{x}$=3.90), with the most common rating for sessions being 'excellent', as shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Ratings of workshop and workshop sessions

	n	$\bar{x}$, mode (range)
Workshop overall	10	3.90, 4 (1)
Question and Answer Panels	10	3.90, 4 (1)
Mock Board Meetings	10	3.80, 4 (1)
Mock Board Meeting Outcome Discussion	10	3.80, 4 (1)
Governance: Beginning the Journey	9	3.56, 4 (2)
Financial Literacy	9	3.78, 4 (1)
Risk	10	3.70, 4 (2)

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	n	$\bar{x}$, mode (range)
Strategic Planning	10	3.90, 4 (1)
Board Culture	10	3.80, 4 (1)
Operations versus Strategic	10	3.90, 4 (1)

Scale: 1=Poor, 2=Okay, 3=Good, 4=Excellent

Further comments from participants noted that they appreciated: the flexibility of the livestreamed workshop sessions; the opportunity to demonstrate what they'd learned; being in 'autistic space', and; feeling supported throughout the workshop.

> **...I learned at every session. I was never disengaged. I felt entirely supported throughout the residential. The Project Team and the board contributions were superb. It was incredibly positive for me. I am really looking forward to contributing to a committee or board.**

> **I really enjoyed the residential. It was really well-organised and well-managed... Everything was considered, from the physical space to having emotional support available, and even having the sessions livestreamed so you could watch from somewhere else (I didn't use it, but that idea is genius!). The Autism CRC team are absolute masters at creating autistic-friendly spaces and it was, as always, just so great to spend a few days in autistic space feeling totally safe and accepted.**

4.3.6 Board Observations (Survey 2)

The Program participants (n=7) rated the board observations as 'good' (n=1), or 'excellent' (n=6, $\bar{x}$=3.86). Further comments from participants noted that having the opportunity to observe a board was informative.

> **It was really great to see a board meeting, and to have a real example for referencing. The mock board meeting was enjoyable, but watching experienced board members was very informative.**

4.3.7 Board Observation Reflection Task (Survey 2)

Of the survey participants that engaged in the board observation reflection task in virtual meetings (n=6), this was rated as 'good' (n=2), or 'excellent' (n=4, $\bar{x}$=3.67).

> **It was helpful to hear about others experiences and to also hear directors talking about how it felt for them to have observers. I loved the Program finishing as it had begun with the original Project Team.**

5. Evaluation Outcomes

Overall, the delivery of Australia's first holistic corporate Governance Program for autistic adults appears to have been hugely successful. The evaluation data indicates that the first objective - increasing the engagement of autistic adults in organisational decision-making – has been met, with Program participants already reporting that they are engaging with opportunities they otherwise would not have pursued. However, as the Program has only recently finished (with timelines needing to be adjusted due to the COVID-19 pandemic), it would be helpful to complete a one year follow up with Program participants.
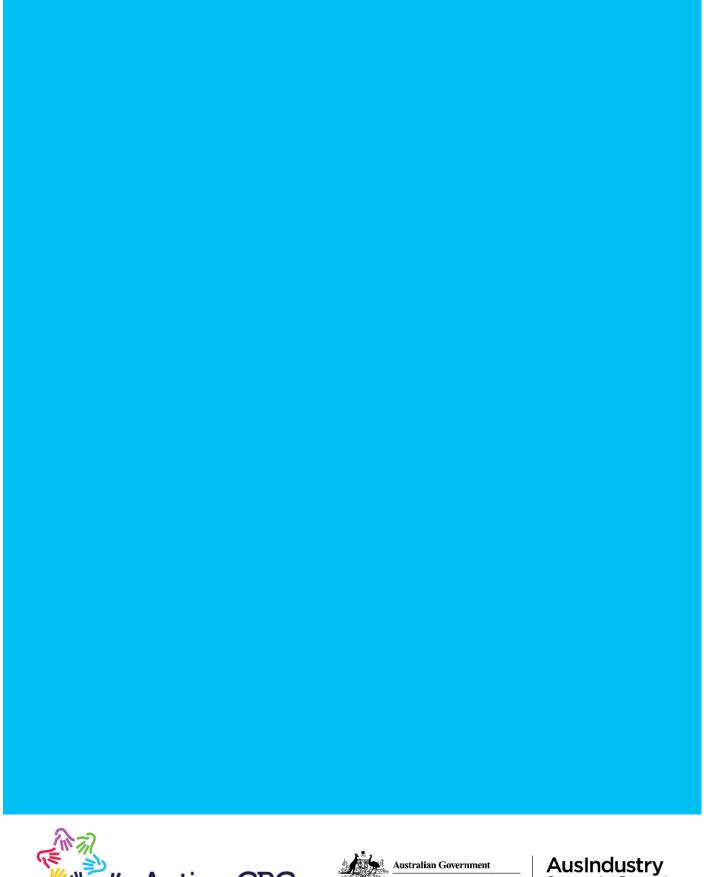
Following the completion of the Governance Program, participants have kept in touch with each other and Project Team members via email and a private Facebook group. Participants have posted and pursued board opportunities as well as personal triumphs, which would indicate that the second objective - establish a national network of autistic people with governance skills, enabling them to share experiences and opportunities – has also been met.

From the evaluation data from survey two, it appears that the Governance Program has successfully achieved its third and fourth objectives of providing participants with practical knowledge and experience and developing skills, and; improving participants understanding of governance structures and different organisational models. Feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive.

> **What an amazing opportunity that helps to highlight some of the strengths that individuals who happen to be autistic have. Thanks.**

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