



AutismCRC

Autism CRC response to the National Disability Employment Strategy consultation paper

**Submission to the Australian Government,
Department of Social Services**

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Australian Government
Department of Industry, Science,
Energy and Resources

AusIndustry
Cooperative Research
Centres Program

autismcrc.com.au

Table of contents

Table of contents	2
1. Introduction	3
1.1. Autism in Australia.....	3
1.2. Autism CRC	4
2. Consultation response	6
2.1. Summary of recommendations.....	6
3. (Proposed) Employment Strategy priority area 1: Lifting employer engagement, capability and demand	7
3.1 Inclusive workplaces and factors for successful employment	7
3.2 Actions and initiatives creating positive change for autistic individuals and employers	8
4. (Proposed) Employment Strategy priority area 2: Building employment skills, experience and confidence of young people with disability	10
4.1 The importance of transition from school to further education, training and employment ...	10
4.2 The role of school-based transition planning and work experience	11
5. Employment Strategy co-design and community engagement	13
5.1 Collaborative research and product development co-designed and coproduced by the autistic and end-user communities.....	13
5.2 Research and development at scale.....	14

1. Introduction

Autism CRC welcomes the opportunity to provide the Australian Government, Department of Social Services, with this submission in response to the National Disability Employment Strategy: Consultation paper. This submission will focus on the needs and employment outcomes of autistic individuals, supporting the Australian Government's objective to increase the number of people with disability in meaningful work.

1.1. Autism in Australia

Autism is a collective term for a group of neurodevelopmental conditions that affect social interaction, communication, behaviours and interests. Every person on the autism spectrum is unique. The developmental challenges and their presentation can vary widely in nature and impact between individuals, and in the same individual over time. Many people on the spectrum experience additional challenges with educational and vocational attainment, physical and mental health and family functioning.

Life outcomes for autistic individuals and their families have been and continue to be far from optimal on many dimensions. Today, we better understand that it is often an individual's co-occurring conditions, circumstance and a non-inclusive community environment that are disabling. As a result, the significant strengths and interests of autistic individuals have often not been recognised and engaged for their and the community's benefit.

Despite growing awareness and understanding of autism and neurodevelopmental conditions over the past decade, the need for relevant evidence-based policy and practice to address the significant disadvantages for individuals and families has arguably never been greater.

- Autism prevalence rates continue to grow rapidly, 25.1% from 2015 to 2018, with more than 200,000 Australians having a diagnosis of autism¹.
- Approximately 3.2% of Australian school-aged children are on the autism spectrum, and these will grow up to be autistic adults¹.
- The proportion of autistic individuals whose highest level of educational attainment is Year 10 or below is 32.4%, more than double that of those with no disability (15.4%)¹.
- The proportion of students proceeding to complete post-school certificate III/IV, diploma, advanced diploma or degree qualifications is 26% for autistic individuals compared with 59.3% for those with no disability¹.
- The 2018 labour force participation rate is 38.0% for autistic people of working age compared with 84.1% of those without disability, with an unemployment rate for autistic individuals almost eight times that for those without disability¹.
- Autistic individuals have a mortality rate more than twice that of the general population².

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2018). Autism in Australia. Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (2018). Available at: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/disability/disability-ageing-and-carers-australia-summary-findings/latest-release#autism-in-australia>.

² Hwang, Y. I., Srasuebku, P., Foley, K.-R., Arnold, S., & Trollor, J. N. (2019). Mortality and cause of death of Australians on the autism spectrum. *Autism Research*, 12(5), 806-815. doi:10.1002/aur.2086

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- Suicide rates for the autistic community are seven times those for the general population³.

For the growing number of Australians on the autism spectrum and with other neurodevelopmental conditions, life outcomes in education, vocation and health and family functioning continue to be far from optimal. The capacity of service sectors and communities to support autistic participation and provide inclusive environments, remains inconsistent and inadequately supported. This leads to lost opportunity, entrenched disability and excessive support costs over a lifetime.

1.2. Autism CRC

The Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism was established in 2013 under the Commonwealth Government's Cooperative Research Centres (CRC) Program and the management of Autism CRC Ltd. It is the world's first national collaboration between researchers, service providers, clinicians, education professionals, government and the end-user community – autistic individuals and their families and carers – working to develop and implement evidence-based and research-informed practice, products and policy that deliver whole-of-life outcomes for people on the autism spectrum (see www.autismcrc.com.au).

Autism CRC's vision is to see:

autistic people empowered to use their diverse strengths and interests,

through its mission to:

motivate, facilitate and translate collaborative autism research, across the life-span and the spectrum, underpinned by inclusive practices.

As a national cooperative venture of stakeholders, Autism CRC is able to address significant areas of need identified by the community, industry and government and importantly, strategically invest in major research activities and the translation of outputs to effective practice and policy at a national scale. Examples are included in this submission.

Autism CRC's cooperative research centre program focuses on three main themes:

- the Early Years – delivering a national protocol for earlier, accurate assessment and diagnosis;
- the School Years – developing educational environments and programs, and equipping teachers, to better support students' social, behavioural and academic development and success; and
- Adulthood – enhancing opportunities for successful transition to post-school life and participation in higher education, further training and employment, and improving the health and wellbeing of people on the autism spectrum.

Autism CRC has conducted a number of projects that are of direct relevance to the Agency's current consultative activities and subsequent considerations. These provide evidence-based and research informed recommendations, programs and resources for employers and autistic individuals, in particular:

³ Hirvikoski, T., Mittendorfer-Rutz, E., Boman, M., Larsson, H., Lichtenstein, P., & Bölte, S. (2016). Premature mortality in autism spectrum disorder. *Br. J. Psychiatry* (2016). 208(3):232-238. doi:10.1192/bjp.bp.114.160192

- Better Outcomes and Successful Transitions for Autism (BOOST-A) research and subsequent design and development of *myWAY Employability* online transition and career planner (www.mywayemployability.com.au);
- *myWAY Employability Educator* co-design and development of teacher focused, classroom-based practices to support high school-based transition planning and career exploration;
- Finding a place in the workplace and in the community research and subsequent design, development and evaluation of the *Integrated Employment Success Tool: an evidence-based guide for employers and autistic adults*;
- *Autism and Agriculture* employment program with SunPork Farms;
- *Autism@Work: Challenges and best practices of sustaining and scaling Autism Employment* research; and
- *Autism@Work* employer community engagement and Summits.

The Australian Government recently awarded Autism CRC \$6 million for two major projects to help improve health services and education and employment outcomes for autistic Australians under the Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) program. This grant was announced in a joint media release by the (then) Minister for Families and Social Services, Senator Anne Ruston, and the (then) Minister for the National Disability Insurance Scheme, Stuart Robert.

This funding is to deliver two major projects:

- Project One: National Best-Practice Assessment and Diagnosis; and
- Project Two: Success in Learning; Transition to Earning.

Project Two aims to deepen effective, inclusive practice within and across the education and employment sectors, working with key stakeholders to expand the content, reach and uptake of two Autism CRC online platforms, *inclusionED* professional learning platform for teachers and *myWAY Employability* career planning for young people and their supporters. Most importantly, the project will connect these online platforms, and bring together other related outputs from our Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) Program, to create an individual journey passport that supports successful transitions from school to further education and training, and/or employment.

Autism CRC will work closely with many parties to deliver these projects, including numerous organisations already within our CRC network. We will again use the national stakeholder collaborative project model that has underpinned our CRC Program work. Where necessary and appropriate, we will also establish new relationships to ensure we can deliver all project objectives. This work is currently underway, with focused delivery until December 2022.

We would welcome the opportunity to speak with the Department on the matters in this submission or other matters of relevance to the consultation. Please direct any questions relating to this response to:

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2. Consultation response

Autism CRC shares the proposed Employment Strategy vision for an inclusive Australian society where all people have access to meaningful work opportunities and offers the following recommendations to support the implementation of the National Disability Employment Strategy.

2.1. Summary of recommendations

1. Establish an Autism Employment Taskforce, including autistic individuals and employers, to support the implementation of the Disability Employment Strategy;
2. Enhance the evidence-base and understanding of supports for autistic individuals, and inclusive human resource practices to:
 - I. build capacity of employers to provide quality evidence-based support to autistic job seekers and employees; and
 - II. support a national community of practice for employers.
3. Integrate employer-focused programs and resources for neurodiverse workplaces within human resource management training and professional development programs.
4. Support the further development and evaluation of neurodiversity employment programs for application beyond Information Technology roles.
5. Quantify and promote the evidence-based benefits of, and practices for, neurodiversity in the workplace.
6. Together with young people with disability, including autistic young people and their supporters (parents, educators, and service providers), co-design and co-develop a youth-focused Disability Employment Strategy.
7. Integrate evidence-based transition planning resources for autistic school-leavers (such as myWAY Employability) for use in high school-based transition planning and the Australian Curriculum: Work Studies Years 9-10; as well as post-school support and employment services.
8. Develop work experience programs for autistic school students, with government supporting their implementation through capacity building incentives.
9. Ensure that the needs and priorities of the autistic and autism communities are reflected in the National Disability Employment Strategy and implementation.
10. Commit to funding further national collaborative research into autism employment, at scale – at least maintaining existing levels of investment over multiple years.

3. (Proposed) Employment Strategy priority area 1: Lifting employer engagement, capability and demand

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the benefits of neurodiversity in the workforce amongst several prominent companies and government organisations⁴. By providing employment practices and environments that enable autistic adults to use their strengths, employers often find that the adjustments help to better identify and leverage the talents of all employees, making workplaces truly inclusive.

3.1 Inclusive workplaces and factors for successful employment

An inclusive workplace is one that promotes respect, dignity, equality and autonomy on a daily basis so that this behaviour is considered the norm. In an inclusive workplace:

- inclusive policies are in place to underpin equality and fairness;
- all staff are aware of the business's inclusive values and are involved in the policy development;
- any barriers or tensions in the workplace are identified and addressed; and
- inclusive strategies are supported and promoted by the senior staff.

Employees of an inclusive workplace are generally happier and more motivated to work as a team, and as a result productivity improves.

Autism CRC research to explore the key factors for successful employment from both the viewpoints of autistic adults and employers found that there are three main factors for successful employment: workplace support, job expectations and productivity^{5,6}. This research further identified that both groups agreed on each factor; however, as each group has a different perspective, communication is key to ensuring these factors continue to create and maintain successful employment⁶.

To support inclusive workplaces, we must:

1. create an awareness of autism and highlight the strengths of autistic employees;
2. assist employers and co-workers to identify potential environmental workplace challenges for autistic employees;
3. recommend clear actions, strategies or modifications required to resolve environmental workplace challenges;

⁴ Austin, RD and Pisano, GP (2017) "Neurodiversity as a Competitive Advantage", Harvard Business Review, May-June 2017, pp. 96-103

⁵ Scott, M., Falkmer, M., Falkmer, T., Girdler, S. (2018). Evaluating the Effectiveness of an Autism-Specific Workplace Tool for Employers: A Randomised Controlled Trial. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 48(10), 3377-3392.

⁶ Scott M, Milbourn B, Falkmer M, Black M, Bölte S, Halladay A, Lerner M, Taylor JL, Girdler S. (2018). Factors impacting employment for people with autism spectrum disorder: A scoping review. *Autism*, 1362361318787789.

4. create a mutually beneficial relationship between employers and employees by building understanding of each other's strengths and workplace requirements; and
5. improve employee productivity, job retention and overall workplace success.

This research informed the development of the Integrated Employment Support Tool (IEST), an evidence-based resource designed specifically for employers of autistic adults⁷. It provides a workplace assessment tool and human resource guide to assist employers in modifying the work environment. The IEST's effectiveness has been tested in a randomised, controlled trial with employers Australia-wide. The IEST is planned for release by the end May 2021, and will be promoted to employment service providers, employers and mainstream human resource industry networks and organisations.

Under the DSS/ILC Project: *Success in Learning, Transition to Earning*, there will be a focus on further development and dissemination of evidence-based resources for employers, which will assist them to implement of inclusive work practices. However, longer term investment in research – and most importantly, its translation into practice – will be needed to fully realise the potential of autistic adults in meaningful employment.

3.2 Actions and initiatives creating positive change for autistic individuals and employers

While there has been an increasing number of companies and government organisations implementing autism employment programs – such as ANZ Bank, SunPork Farms and the Department of Defence – the number of organisations and the number of individuals employed through these programs are low. Companies implementing neurodiversity employment programs have encountered challenges in doing so, for example, in identifying and sourcing suitable candidates, and managing employee anxiety⁸ post-recruitment. These all require a change to workplace practices, which again, implemented systemically, might bring benefits to all employees and the organisation. The more mature employment programs have developed their practices to support sustained careers. However, there remains limited understanding amongst employers generally of the benefits of neurodiversity in the workplace and the pathway to implementing appropriate programs.

A recent Autism CRC study into the challenges, learnings and best practices of organisations in sustaining and scaling autism employment, surveyed 169 autistic employees, co-workers, supervisors, human resource directors and executives from 33 for-profit, non-profit and social enterprise organisations across 12 countries. Representing one of the first large scale, global quantitative studies in autism employment, the research revealed several individual (gender, disclosed/non-disclosed, level of diagnosis), as well as contextual (employment and employer type, country), factors that were related to autistic workers' perceived helpfulness of adjustments and organisational practices, workplace satisfaction, employment-related security, and inclusion. These findings suggest that there is not a one-size-fits all approach or solution and we must work closely

⁷ The Integrated Employment Success Tool (IEST) will be available for download from the Autism CRC website by end May 2021: www.autismcrc.com.au/IEST

⁸ Krzeminska, A., Austin, R., Bruyère, S. & Hedley, D. (2019) "The advantages and challenges of neurodiversity employment in organizations", in *Journal of Management & Organization* (2019), 25, 453–463 doi:10.1017/jmo.2019.58

with autistic individuals and employers to better understand the nuances of workplaces and their respective experiences and needs.

Recognising the diversity of strengths and interests of autistic individuals, we highlight the importance of providing inclusive employment opportunities in a diverse range of roles and industries. A high proportion of existing neurodiversity employment programs are centred around Information Technology related skills and roles. These existing successful programs need to be evaluated, adapted and applied to other industry sectors.

One exception is the Autism & Agriculture program implemented by SunPork Farms with support from Autism CRC and Specialisterne Australia, which sees 12 autistic employees engaged in on-farm operations at two SunPork sites – those individuals having been employed now for over 3 years⁹.

The benefits of neurodiversity in employment need to be viewed as an important and beneficial component of workforce diversity like other dimensions of diversity, e.g. gender and culture. While there is an inherent 'public good' view of such programs, it is also important that the business benefit of workforce neurodiversity is evidenced and broader community awareness of these benefits is achieved.

Autism CRC is working to better understand the barriers and enablers to autism employment and increase awareness of successful programs through the Autism@ Work initiative. Together with DXC Technology, Autism CRC launched the Autism@Work initiative in Australia in 2017. In addition to hosting the Autism@Work employer summit each year, the Autism@Work practice community provides the mechanism for sharing tools, resources and information from inclusive neurodiversity employment programs and approaches¹⁰.

Recommendation(s):

1. Establish an Autism Employment Taskforce, including autistic individuals and employers, to support the implementation of the Disability Employment Strategy;
2. Enhance the evidence-base and understanding of supports for autistic individuals, and inclusive human resource practices to:
 - I. build capacity of employers to provide quality evidence-based support to autistic job seekers and employees; and
 - II. support a national community of practice for employers.
3. Integrate employer-focused programs and resources for neurodiverse workplaces within human resource management training and professional development programs.
4. Support the further development and evaluation of neurodiversity employment programs for application beyond Information Technology roles.
5. Quantify and promote the evidence-based benefits of, and practices for, neurodiversity in the workplace.

⁹ A comprehensive evaluation of the Autism and Agriculture program, was undertaken in 2018, led by Curtin University. The report can be viewed at <https://www.autismcrc.com.au/knowledge-centre/reports/autism-and-agriculture-program>

¹⁰ 2021 Autism@Work (virtual) summit is 24-25 August.

(Proposed) Employment Strategy priority area 2: Building employment skills, experience and confidence of young people with disability

The most recent ABS data (2018) show that the proportion of autistic individuals whose highest level of educational attainment is Year 10 or below is 32.4%, more than double that of those without disability (15.4%). Similarly, the proportion of students proceeding to complete post-school certificate III/IV, diploma, advanced diploma or degree qualifications is 26% for autistic individuals compared with 59.3% for non-autistic individuals⁷.

This significant disparity in education and employment outcomes based on diagnosis indicates that the majority of autistic individuals of working age are not given opportunities to use their diverse strengths and interests, and too many are not reaching their potential. Autistic people have many strengths and attributes that are unique and can make them extremely valuable employees. However, unemployment figures suggest that further work needs to be done to support autistic young people to transition to employment, where they can become valued members of the workforce.

Autistic young people face unique challenges that may impact their employability. These may include difficulties with social communication required for the workplace; sensory seeking or avoidance behaviours; and the need for structure, routine, or predictability in work tasks and instructions¹¹. Other challenges facing these young people may include anxiety about life after school, difficulties imagining their life after high school, and limited opportunities to engage in real-life experiences that help them develop important skills and successfully transition to work and independent living¹².

4.1 The importance of transition from school to further education, training and employment

Autism CRC supports the proposed focus on early and inclusive career exploration, development and capacity building in their supporters (parents, carers, teachers, career advisors, disability support workers and medical professionals) to assist young people on their employment journey.

Successfully transitioning from school to work and/or further study can significantly improve an individual's long-term economic future, social inclusion and wellbeing, but autistic young people face major barriers to gain entry into the labour market. Having a clear and coordinated transition planning approach makes it more likely that a young person will enter the workforce or undertake further education/training after leaving school¹³.

¹¹ Lee, G. K., & Carter, E. W. (2012). Preparing transition-age students with high-functioning autism spectrum disorders for meaningful work. *Psychology in the Schools*, 49, 988–1000. doi: 10.1002/pits.21651

¹² Stewart, D. (2013). Transitions to adulthood for youth with disabilities through an occupational therapy lens. Thorofare, NJ: SLACK Incorporated.

¹³ Hatfield, M., Ciccarelli, M., Falkmer, T., & Falkmer, M. (2018). Factors related to successful transition planning for adolescents on the autism spectrum. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 18(1), 3–14. doi: 10.1111/1471-3802.12388

Providing young people with early support using a tailored career planning program can set them up for future success with employment. The research literature indicates that starting career planning and goal setting early, preferably in Year 9 of high school, ensures adequate time and opportunities to identify career interests, develop life skills including independent community mobility, and participate in work experiences¹⁴.

One of the key themes of Autism CRC's Adulthood program has been the development of programs and tools to support transition from high school to further education, training and employment. This program saw the development of the Better Outcomes and Successful Transitions for Autism (BOOST-A) and its subsequent evaluation in a nationwide quasi-randomised control trial, involving young people and their parents, education and health professionals who support them. Students reported higher levels of self-determination to achieve their goals for further study or training and employment goals, than students who used the existing generic school-based transition planning processes¹⁵.

Autism CRC has since incorporated BOOST-A in a smart web platform, [myWAY Employability](#)¹⁶, designed specifically to help autistic young people to plan and prepare for their working life. *myWAY Employability* guides young people through a series of questions to help them identify their strengths, interests, sensory, learning and environmental preferences; undertakes matching to relevant potential careers and employment pathways; and provides scaffolded goal-setting to track progress towards employment. It also contains a variety of information articles co-produced with the autistic community, covering topics such as [Preparing for Work Experience](#), [Getting Around](#), [Creating a Job Application](#), [Pathways for Formal Education and Training](#), and [Disclosure in the Workplace](#).

Adopting a human-centred design approach, Autism CRC engaged over 300 stakeholders - young people, parents, health professionals, and educators. 90 autistic young people were directly involved in the design and development of *myWAY Employability*; taking part in co-design workshops, user testing, and/or providing feedback on various elements of the website. *myWAY Employability* launched in August 2020, and to date has had over 9,300 unique visitors, with over 1,100 registered users. A user evaluation of *myWAY Employability* is currently in progress and will inform future development of the platform and its application in school-based transition planning, employment and disability support services and in workplaces.

4.2 The role of school-based transition planning and work experience

Educators have a unique role in supporting the transition and career planning of autistic young people. The pathway to successful employment starts at school and research into transition planning shows that early work experience is a key determinant of subsequent labour market

¹⁴ Hatfield, M., Falkmer, M., Falkmer, T., & Ciccarelli, M. (2017b). "Leaps of faith": Parent and professional viewpoints on preparing adolescents on the autism spectrum for leaving school. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 17(3), 187–197. doi: 10.1111/1471-3802.12377

¹⁵ Hatfield, M., Falkmer, M., Falkmer, T., & Ciccarelli, M. (2017a). Effectiveness of the BOOST-A™ online transition planning program for adolescents on the autism spectrum: A quasi-randomized controlled trial. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, 11(54), 1–12. doi: 10.1186/s13034-017-0191-2

¹⁶ www.mywayemployability.com.au was developed in consultation with over 90 autistic young people, and their supporters, parents, allied health professionals, researchers, disability service providers and educators from around Australia, and supported by Telstra Foundation under the Tech4Good Challenge initiative.

success¹⁷. Work experience during school years is an enabler of post-school employment, developing employability, increasing awareness of career options and employment, and increasing self-understanding and confidence.

For many students with disability, there is very little, if any, school-based career counselling, work experience and information about post-school options. Research has shown that transition planning is often addressed in an ad hoc manner, as an optional extra rather than core requirement of support to school leavers. This contrasts with students who do not have a disability, who may be offered a lot more options and information¹⁸.

Well supported work placements during high school may provide autistic young people with knowledge and experience of the world of work, facilitating the development of skills to assist in gaining meaningful employment in adulthood¹⁹. Positive career development and early work experiences are an important focus of transition planning and access to a combination of career development experiences during middle to senior high school can provide young people with the opportunity to acquire important work skills and values, inform their vocational decision-making, and shape their career aspirations for the future²⁰.

[An educator's guide to using myWAY Employability](#)²¹ is currently being co-designed and developed with professionals and educators to use in transition planning support services and schools. These resources are currently available (via the [inclusionED](#) practice platform), and will be trialled in Term 3, 2021 by educators in Queensland and Western Australia. These resources will be further developed under Autism CRC ILC project: *Success in Learning, Transition to Earning*, in 2022.

An increasing number of Australian companies are engaging autistic employees and implementing neurodiversity employment programs – including Commonwealth and state government agencies. These employers have highlighted the relatively low level of workforce readiness of potential employees as a barrier or additional cost to employment. Such organisations could provide appropriate environments for work experience or internships for autistic students, aiding transition to employment post-school. The development of work experience programs for autistic school students, their implementation supported by government, may not only encourage these organisations to offer work experience opportunities, but may also encourage other employers to do so and consider adopting neurodiverse employment policies more generally.

¹⁷ Mamun, A.A., Carter, E.W., Fraker, T.M. & Timmins, L.L. (2017) Impact of Early Work Experiences on Subsequent Paid Employment for Young Adults with Disabilities, in *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals* (CDTEI), Vol 41, issue 4. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2165143417726302>

¹⁸ Children with Disability Australia (2015) *Post School Transition The Experiences of Students with Disability*. Children with Disability Australia, Collingwood, Victoria. Retrieved 7/12/2020 <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2015-12/apo-nid60943.pdf>

¹⁹ Lee, E.A.L., Black, M.H., Tan, T., Falkmer, T. & Girdler, S. (2019) "I'm Destined to Ace This": Work Experience Placement During High School for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *J Autism Developmental Disorder* 49, 3089–3101 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-019-04024-x> pp.3096

²⁰ Vondracek, Fred W. and Porfeli, Erik J. (2006) The world of work and career (Ch. 6) in (Eds) Adams, Gerald R. and Berzonsky, Michael D. *Blackwell Handbook of Adolescence*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd

²¹ myWAY Employability Educator resources have been co-designed with teachers, and are currently available from <https://www.inclusioned.edu.au/myway-educator>

Recommendation(s):

6. Together with young people with disability, including autistic young people and their supporters (parents, educators and service providers), co-design and co-develop a youth-focused Disability Employment Strategy.
7. Integrate evidence-based transition planning resources for autistic school-leavers (such as *myWAY Employability*) for use in high school-based transition planning and the Australian Curriculum: WorkStudies Years 9-10; as well as post-school support and employment services.
8. Develop work experience programs for autistic school students, with government supporting their implementation through capacity building incentives.

4. Employment Strategy co-design and community engagement

Autism CRC commends the Australian government on its commitment to a holistic and innovative approach to disability employment, seeking to engage all stakeholders including, and most importantly people with disability.

Our experience of undertaking research, product and policy development in the employment space has highlighted two important elements that deliver positive impacts in the lives of autistic individuals and their families: collaborative research and product development co-designed and coproduced by the autistic and end-user communities; and research and development at scale – in terms of objectives, impact, timeframes and resources.

5.1 Collaborative research and product development co-designed and coproduced by the autistic and end-user communities

Enabled by the Commonwealth CRC Program, Autism CRC has been able to bring together previously disparate research, clinical, service provider and government organisations to work collaboratively on research priorities of national importance. There are currently 56 organisations engaged as participants in the CRC, located across Australia and overseas.

These organisations represent health and education professionals; major service providers across Australia and New Zealand; universities and a medical research institute; school systems; an international healthcare company and other technology companies; Commonwealth and State Government departments and agencies; and, critically, those on the spectrum and their families. The collaboration of these organisations has the capacity to design and conduct research activities and translate the outputs to practice and policy.

It is also noted that Autism CRC has been at the forefront of driving participatory research practice in Australia, including through the Research Co-Production program offered through the Sylvia

Rodger Academy to develop the capacity of autistic adults and autism researchers to work as peers in research²².

The Sylvia Rodger Academy was established by Autism CRC to build capacity within the autistic community in leadership, advocacy, corporate governance, and research coproduction – so that autistic individuals might play a greater role in the programs, policy and other activities that impact upon their lives. The Academy has had 105 participants graduate from its programs, with a number of alumni having gone on to take management, advisory and governance roles with service providers, advocacy organisations and government disability councils, as well as others being engaged as researchers within the university sector.

The Australian Autism Research Council (AARC) was established by Autism CRC in 2018 to review and define community-driven national priorities for autism research²³. The AARC includes autistic adults, parents of children on the spectrum as well as service providers, health and education professionals, government policy/program representatives (currently a NDIA representative), and researchers. The AARC provides a mechanism for individuals and families to help set the direction for future research through community consultation. The AARC has recently completed a community focus group process, further investigating areas in need of evidence-based supports and information in the fields of communication, education, employment, health & wellbeing and justice.

5.2 Research and development at scale

With the time and resources available through the eight-year Commonwealth CRC program, Autism CRC has been able to strategically invest in quality research projects, involving multiple parties over multiple years, and bring these together to address significant national needs. Without such time and resources, *myWAY Employability*, *inclusionED* professional practice platform and the Integrated Employment Success Tool (IEST) could not have been delivered, founded as they were on prior years of research on needs analysis, development and evaluation.

FY21 is the final year that Commonwealth CRC funding is to be provided for the Autism CRC program. Autism CRC is presently securing a legacy operation so that it can continue the important work of addressing long term research and translation priorities for practice and policy, as determined by autism community stakeholders.

Recommendation(s):

9. Ensure that the needs and priorities of the autistic and autism communities are reflected in the National Disability Employment Strategy and implementation; and
10. Commit to funding further national collaborative research into autism employment, at scale – at least maintaining existing levels of investment over multiple years.

²² More information about Autism CRC Sylvia Rodger Academy can be found at autismcrc.com.au/sylvia-rodger-academy

²³ More information about Autism CRC AARC including 2020 Research Priorities papers and report(s) can be found at <https://www.autismcrc.com.au/aarc>

