

Introduction:

This response is submitted by the following group of academics from Queensland University of Technology: Professor Beth Sagers, Professor Sue Carrington, and Associate Professor Sofia Mavropoulou

This response focuses on what the National Autism Strategy needs to achieve to include autistic learners in education and support them to flourish in their learning and be socially and economically included in the short and long term.

The response heavily references a soon-to-be released Autism CRC White Paper that reports on recent empirical research focused on removing educational barriers in Australian schools for autistic learners. Further detail connected to our response can be found in this reference when released:

Sagers, B., Mavropoulou, S., Carrington, S., Paynter, J., Adams, D., Malone, S., Westerveld, M., Mc Keown, G., Constantine, C., Bartlett, T., B., C., Gately, J., Heath, S., Porter, A., Stewart, C.J., Winspear-Schillings, H., Nepal, S., Dunne, J., Sagers, A., Wilde, J., van Leent, L., Wright, N., Marsh, C., & O'Connor, K. (2023). *Removing educational barriers in Australian schools for autistic students: A white paper on current trends, gaps, and recommendations in educational research, inclusive policy, and educational practice*. Autism CRC: Brisbane, Australia.

Our Response relates to the overarching question: **What does a National Autism Strategy need to achieve?** The response will frame recommendations with consideration to research, policy, and practice.

1. Research

Recommend Federal, states and territories to allocate funding for conducting participatory research with engagement with the Autistic community on:

- practices and academic and social learning outcomes for autistic students (from early years to high school) with multiple attributes and intersectional identities in various settings, geographical locations, and jurisdictions (Sagers et al., In press. Section 2 pp. 70-78; 117-121).
- Australian based educational autism research focused on classroom practices and the effects of built environment and learning spaces on student learning (Sagers et al., In press. Section 2 pp. 85-86; 117-121).

2. Policy and Practice

A. Knowledge and Understanding

Schools are complex, multilayered, fluid social environments that can be extremely challenging for the autistic learner to navigate without appropriate enablers in place. Current barriers to education are often linked to a lack of knowledge or understanding of the multiple ways this group of learners can be marginalised within school environments as a result of the lack of neurodiversity-affirming approaches in place, that acknowledges their

multiple attributes and intersectional profiles (Saggers et al., In press. Section 2 pp. 85-86; Section 3 pp. 98-112; Section 4 117-121).

The National Autism Strategy therefore needs to build educator/allied health and school community knowledge and capabilities to support autistic learner success. This will be achieved through:

- Professional development learning for educators and allied health regarding neurodiversity affirming approaches and how they can be translated into effective practice (Saggers et al., In press. Section 4 pp. 114).
- Leadership by Autistic individuals/community in/leading professional learning and training programs (Saggers et al., In press. Section 3 pp. 100-112).
- Acknowledgement of an alternate definition of complexity (Pfeiffer, 2015) that considers co-occurring conditions and describes complexity as a set of multiple attributes, such as culture, identity, academic needs, and wellbeing. Developing an understanding of this complexity can help us to decipher how these multiple attributes may influence the educational success of the autistic learner (Saggers et al., In press. Section 4 pp. 113-116). Building understanding of these multiple attributes across education and health professionals is key to the success of the National Autism Strategy.
- Increased understanding of autistic diversity and neurodivergence in education and allied health fields (Saggers et al., In press. Section 2 pp. 63-73).
- Listening to the voice of autistic learners and their parents/caregivers will support deeper understanding of their requirements and expectations (Saggers et al., In press. Section 2., p.50, pp. 70-73).
- Promotion of a broader view of the capabilities of the autistic community and how it can guide responsive pedagogies (Saggers et al., In press. Section 3 pp. 101-112).
- Enhanced understanding and awareness for families, communities, educators, and allied health, of learning and wellbeing related to:
 - Identity and neurodivergence including CALD, First Nations, gender diversity, geographical diversity (Saggers et al., In press. Section 2 pp. 70-78).
 - Family and siblings' needs (Saggers et al., In press. Section 2 pp. 75-78).
 - Different genders and gender diversity (Saggers et al., In press. Section 2 p. 73).
 - Inclusive policies and practices that support diversity in schools (Saggers et al., In press. Section 2 pp. 79-83; 87-97).
 - Built environment and learning space design (Saggers et al., In press. Section 2 pp. 52-56).
 - Factors influencing student wellbeing (Saggers et al., In press. Section 2 pp. 57-62).

B. Better in-situ specialist multi-disciplinary support (that included both educators and allied health professionals' input) in schools to help general classroom teachers to translate knowledge and professional learning into contextually fit practices through provision of funding, resources, and time. This would include:

- Ensuring access to professional learning, support, and mentoring and coaching for educators, allied health, school communities to support autistic learners to flourish (Saggers et al., In press. Section 4 pp. 113-116; 120-123).
- Recommending schools to work with the autistic community to set up self-advocacy programs for the rights of autistic students and the adjustments they require (Saggers et al., In press. Section 4 120-123).
- Supporting positive partnerships with families through giving school communities adequate resourcing (including time and funding) for collaboration with families and external stakeholders (Saggers et al., In press. Section 2 pp. 75-78).
- Stronger emphasis on implementing strength-based whole-school approaches to student diversity (Saggers et al., In press. Section 2 pp. 45-53, 79-83; Section 3 pp. 101-112).
- Adequate resourcing and support to ensure flexibility in how curriculum is offered, delivered, and assessed (Saggers et al., In press. Section 2 pp. 45-53, 79-83; Section 3 pp. 101-112).
- Supporting inclusive practices that promote and embed wellbeing in a multi-tiered approach (Saggers et al., In press. Section 2 pp. 57-62, 79-83; Section 3 pp. 101-112).
- Embedding culturally sensitive and responsive, inclusive practices (Saggers et al., In press. Section 2 pp. 70-73, 79-83; section 4 p119).
- Nurturing fundamentally inclusive attitudes towards autistic people drawing on cultural values of acceptance and support of all community members (Saggers et al., In press. Section 2 pp. 70-73; Section 3 pp. 101-112).
- Understanding the risk of intersectionality and implementing supports to reduce risk (Saggers et al., In press. Section 2 pp. 64-68, 70-73; Section 3 pp. 101-112; Section 4 pp.113-116).
- Enabling access to information in more culturally diverse ways (Saggers et al., In press. Section 2 pp. 70-73).
- Promotion of autistic agency (Saggers et al., In press. Section 2 pp. 70-73; Section 4 pp.120-121).