

Submission to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability



September 2020

The Australian Autism Alliance - 'One Strong Voice for Autism'

The Australian Autism Alliance (the Alliance) was established in 2016 to create 'one strong voice for autism.' Our purpose is to improve the life chances of autistic people and to facilitate collaboration within the autism community.

The Alliance is a national network of 12 diverse autism organisations and brings together autistic led organisations, research bodies, advocacy groups and service providers.

AEIOU Foundation

AMAZE

Autism Queensland

Autism SA

I CAN Network

Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN)

Australasian Society for Autism Research (ASfAR)

Autism Spectrum Australia

Autism Association of Western Australia

Autism Aspergers Advocacy Australia (A4)

Autism Tasmania

The Sycamore School



Autism CRC is an Alliance supporter



Recent work of the Alliance includes:

- creation of a Federal Election Manifesto in 2019
- advocating for establishment of the Disability Royal Commission
- commissioning the largest and most comprehensive community consultation survey of autistic people and their families and carers in Australia to inform the Senate Inquiry into Autism. The survey was conducted by the Australian Catholic University under the direction of Professor Sandra Jones, an autistic academic, with a panel of autistic people. Survey questions were mapped against the Inquiry's Terms of Reference. Over 3,800 responses were received.

The Australian Autism Alliance has substantial national reach

- Reaches over 170,000 people through our communication channels
- Employs over 3,000 staff
- Employs, or provide pathways to employment, for over 350 autistic adults
- Contributes to the Australian economy by generating and delivering an estimated \$200m of supports and services
- Builds capacity of the broader community through training and advisory services for over 60,000 people per year
- Covers nearly all of Australia
- Has significant national and international linkages for advocacy, research and service delivery
- Provides direct support to over 30,000 autistic people across the lifespan from early childhood to adulthood
- Operates 230 service outlets across Australia

Introduction

This submission to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability presents the views of the Australian Autism Alliance and their partners, stakeholders and communities.

It is drawn from the formal submission that the Alliance made to the Senate Select Committee on Autism, and presents an outline of the Alliance's views on how autistic people fare in the education system and in employment, and offers considered structural reform recommendations that the Royal Commission might consider in its deliberations.

Education is key to life chances

Autistic students are not faring well in education and training

Autistic students are faring worse than most other cohorts across the education spectrum – from early learning, through schools, and into further and higher education.

- **Barriers to education can mean many autistic people leave school very early:** Around one-third of autistic students only achieve Year 10 or below (compared with 17% of students without disability). These very early school leavers are at high risk of a lifetime of disadvantage.
- **Autistic people are under-represented in Vocation Education & Training**
Just 17.9% of autistic people have a Certificate III; diploma or advanced diploma as their highest qualification, compared with 29.4% of all people with disability.
- **University completions are very low:** Autistic people are half as likely to get a bachelor degree or higher (8.1%) as all people with disability (16.1%). People with disability are four times more likely to attain a university qualification.

A recent Australian study found that autistic school leavers are less likely to be employed, more likely to attend technical and further education (TAFE) than university, more likely to enrol in higher education on a part-time basis and less likely to be engaged in both higher education and employment, than their non-autistic peers.¹

There are significant barriers to successful engagement with education and training

Learning environments can be very challenging for autistic students. Barriers include communication, social interaction, unique learning styles and an environment and system that is not designed with autistic students in mind. Often individual needs are not met and individual strengths are not recognised or harnessed for learning. Key issues reported in research and in our survey include:

¹ Flower, RL. Et al., 2020. Brief Report: *What Happens After School? Exploring Post-school Outcomes for a Group of Autistic and Non-autistic Australian Youth* *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs10803-020-04600-6>

A culture of low expectations and damaging assumptions of low capability

Autistic students face an increased risk of under-performing academically relative to their level of intelligence.² They well and truly face the “soft bigotry of low expectations”.

“Never felt supported at high school and career advisor suggested he should find a trade. It was made clear to the school he hoped to achieve an athletic scholarship to a US college which has subject requirements for eligibility, however the school would not allow him to do some of the required subjects as they did not have the ability to support him, making the process a lot more challenging. All students should have access to support needed at school to help them achieve the outcomes they hope to achieve.”

Low understanding of autism among educators and trainers

Concerns about the understanding and knowledge of autism among educators and trainers mirrors that found in other key parts of the mainstream service system. The need to upskill education staff in supporting autistic students is uncontroverted. Teacher knowledge about autism in mainstream schools is limited: teachers report being unsure how to best support autistic students.³

Respondents to our survey repeatedly identified a lack of capability in these settings.

“As a teacher, I do not think that enough training is provided to mainstream teachers and support staff to understand autism well enough. I taught in mainstream schools, but now in a special school, and I know that mainstream schools are nowhere near well enough equipped with the knowledge, strategies or resources to successful integrate children with more complex autism.”

“Maybe neurodiversity modules and units could be introduced into training, and as required qualifications to be able to teach or be in charge of the structure of a school, in the same way OHS learning is required”

There are range of initiatives aimed at addressing these gaps in knowledge and understanding, most notably the federally funded Positive Partnerships Program which focuses on home-school partnerships in supporting autistic students, including for CALD and First Nations families. However, this has limited reach and high demand means sessions are often over-subscribed. The Program has undergone external evaluations, all of which have recommended that it be extended. Program funding lapses at the end of 2020, which further compounds the challenges of bridging the gap between home and school settings. The on-line platform InclusionED⁴ also exists.

At a state level, Queensland’s Autism Hub (profiled below) is a stand out example that has the potential to be further strengthened and replicated around the nation to build system capability.

² Ashburner, J. et al., 2010. *Surviving in the mainstream: Capacity of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders to perform academically and regulate their emotions and behaviour at school*. Available at:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1750946709000798?via%3Dihub>

³ Sagers, B. et al., 2018. *Australian Autism Educational Needs Analysis – What are the needs of schools, parents and students on the autism spectrum? Final Report*, Autism CRC. Available at:

<https://www.autismcrc.com.au/sites/default/files/inline-files/Educational%20Needs%20Analysis%20-%20Final%20report%20Version%202.pdf>

⁴ *InclusionED* is an online resource and national community of practice providing evidence-based and research-informed teaching practices and resources for educators to employ in supporting students with diverse learning needs and styles in inclusive mainstream schools. It is based on principles of Universal Design for Learning and was developed from Autism CRCs School Years Program. Available at: www.inclusioned.edu.au

Queensland's Autism Hub – providing dedicated support for the education sector

Introduced as part of the Queensland Department of Education's 'Advancing education, an action plan for education in Queensland', the Autism Hub is designed to build the capacity of school leaders, teachers and parents, and support the inclusion of autistic students.

Autism coaches are located in 7 regions across Queensland. They provide schools with advice on how to best support autistic students in an inclusive environment, and improve their educational outcomes. A website provides autism specific resources including the Queensland School Autism Reflection Tool (QsArt) which is designed to enable school leaders to consider and implement school improvement processes for autistic students.

The Hub is guided by input from the Autism Hub Advisory Group. Further information is available at <https://ahrc.eq.edu.au/>

TAFE hosts large numbers of autistic students and is well placed to provide a gateway to employment, yet has no systemic approach to supporting autistic learners. This must be addressed.

Low rates of adjustments and modifications made for autistic students

Less than half of parents with schools aged children responding to our survey reported that adjustments made at school were mostly or completely adequate (42.2%). Just over a third (38.7%); indicated that adjustments were partly or not at all adequate. The most common school adjustments reported were learning related including having a key point of contact at the school to discuss their child's needs and progress; modifications to curriculum, assessment and exam conditions; and access to an education aide.

Of those who disclosed their diagnosis to further and higher education institutions, about half of the autistic adults (48.2%) and 22% of parents/carers reporting on behalf of an autistic person indicated that **no adjustments** were made by the institution.

"It's been horrible, I don't feel like I am listened to at all in the [student] support services, and the teaching has been so inconsistent. Half the lecturers straight up refuse to record lectures, disability service did not advocate for my need despite having an auditory processing disorder, they just said that was it and they can't change it. It has taken me 8 years to get to do my last semester of my degree. The whole experience has been depressing."

For those who received adjustments, the most common were modified assessment/exam procedures, provision of a disability support person, a quiet room/area, and establishing a process by which they can leave the classroom without explanation if they need to take a break.

Lack of positive support for social and emotional wellbeing

Our survey revealed an absence of support for the social and emotional wellbeing of autistic students.

Autistic students are significantly more likely than their non-autistic peers to be targets of bullying⁵, and suffer depression and anxiety.⁶

⁵ Van Roekel, E. et al., 2010. *Bullying among Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Prevalence and Perception*. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2809311/>

⁶ Kim, J. A. et al., 2000. *The prevalence of anxiety and mood problems among children with autism and Asperger Syndrome*. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1362361300004002002>

“His life at university has been impacted by his refusal to tell the university that he is autistic, he feels that it would single him out and expose him to the same bullying he experienced at high school.”

“Had to be home schooled for high school due to bullying. No educational support provided as my mother had to do this all on her own.”

High rates of suspensions and exclusions for autistic students⁷ and the use of restrictive practices remain a live issue (as highlighted by the Disability Royal Commission). There is no agreed and consistent approach to positive behaviour management across education and learning settings, which further disenfranchises autistic learners.

Transition support is critical

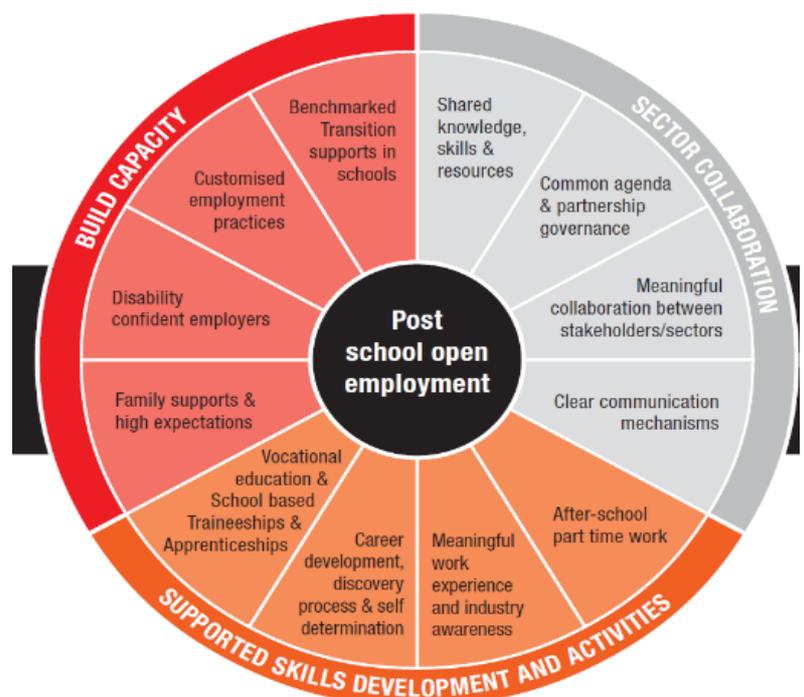
Many autistic children are starting school without an individualised learning plan – meaning schools are not ready to receive them and make the adjustments needed to get off to a good start.

Lack of support in making the transition from secondary school to further study and employment is a common experience for autistic students. A small percentage of autistic adults (11.1%) and a quarter of parents/carers (24.2%) responding to our survey indicated that an “ok or good level of support” was provided to assist the transition from secondary school to further study. More than half (62.9%), and almost half (41.8%), respectively, indicated that no support was provided. A number of other studies reveal consistent findings.⁸

Autistic school students rarely participate in work experience, which severely impacts on opportunities for vocational exploration, and to build aspiration and networks.

A number of initiatives exist to support transitions, for example:

- **Ticket to Work** is demonstrating significant improvements in employment opportunities and outcomes for young people with



⁷ Barnard, J. et al., 2000. *Inclusion and autism: Is it working?* Available at:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/251814768_Inclusion_and_Autism_Is_It_Working

⁸ OTARC, 2019. *Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA): A longitudinal study of post-school outcomes for young people with and without autism, 2014 – 2021.* Available at: <https://www.autismcrc.com.au/our-programs/adulthood/study-australian-school-leavers-autism-sasla-15-25-years>

disability,⁹ including autistic young people. It provides a holistic approach (see adjacent diagram) including opportunities for work experience, vocational exploration and links to employers.

Reliance on a mix of philanthropic, corporate and state based grants means it has limited reach and long term sustainability

- **myWAY Employability app** has just been launched by Autism CRC (Aug 2020). This free app is designed for autistic young people (aged 14-30 years) and covers careers exploration matched to strengths and interests, career planning, further education and employment pathways. It includes practical resources around preparing for work experience and job applications.¹⁰
- The federally funded **School Leavers Employment Support (SLES)** program is available to those on NDIS Plans who are in their last year of school (and sometimes the following year). Shortcomings include its access commences too late in a student's school life, a lack of aspiration around student potential and prospects and narrow eligibility criteria.

The **Shergold Review into Senior Secondary Pathways** (currently being considered by the COAG Education Council) recommends that all senior secondary students with disability have access to work exploration in school and an individual post-school transition plan in place prior to leaving school.¹¹ The Alliance endorses this recommendation.

The Disability Standards for Education need to be substantially overhauled

Discrimination against autistic students in the education system is a common experience. Research by Amaze found that many autistic students are denied enrolment in mainstream settings or have to move secondary schools due to a lack of support.¹² Likewise, over one-third of parents responding to our survey reported that they felt that their child had been discriminated against in school or when seeking to access an education.

The fact that autistic students are over-represented in special schools¹³, that numbers of students with disability in segregated settings are on the increase,¹⁴ as is home schooling for children with special learning needs¹⁵ speaks volumes about a system that ignores the needs and rights of autistic people.

“Our son's school has completely left him out of every school camp, mainstream excursion and Aboriginal education experience.”

⁹ Information about Ticket to Work is available at: <https://tickettowork.org.au/>

¹⁰ Information and links to resources are available at: mywayemployability.com.au

¹¹ COAG Education Council, 2020. *Looking To The Future, Report Of The Review Of Senior Secondary Pathways Into Work, Further Education and Training*. Available at: <https://uploadstorage.blob.core.windows.net/public-assets/education-au/pathways/Final%20report%20-%2018%20June.pdf>

¹² Jones S et al., 2017. *Experiences of Autistic People and their Families*. Centre for Health and Social Research, Australian Catholic University. Available at: https://www.amaze.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Education-Community-Attitudes-and-Lived-Experiences-Research-Report_FINAL.pdf

¹³ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018. *Autism in Australia. Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, 2018*. Available at: <https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4430.0Main+Features102018>.

¹⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017. *Disability in Australia: Changes over time in inclusion and participation in education*. Available at: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/34f09557-0acf-4adf-837d-eada7b74d466/Education-20905.pdf.aspx>

¹⁵ NSW Education Standards Authority, 2020. *Home Schooling Data reports relating to 2019*. Available at: <https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/wcm/connect/426e1f11-5752-4c1c-bdcc-68b880c0e0b3/Home+Schooling+Data+relating+to+2018+for+publication+on+NESA+website.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=>

A review of the Disability Standards for Education (DSE)¹⁶ is currently underway. This work will run in parallel with the Senate Inquiry, and we hope the processes will be complementary.

Many of the shortcomings identified in the previous review of the DSE's (undertaken in 2015) remain outstanding. Key concerns include that the standards are viewed as aspirational, rather than a mandatory requirement; that they are difficult to enforce in practice; that individual breaches do not inform systemic change; and that the right to adjustments is constrained by the very significant caveat about these not impact other students or teachers. With a number of key inclusion indicators going backwards, the DSE's are not delivering.

The DSE's need to be substantially overhauled to positively reframe inclusive education as a right, strengthen protections and create accountabilities in the education system for progressively improving outcomes (e.g. improved school attainment, reduced suspensions and expulsions, elimination of restrictive practices). The National Consistent Collection of Data project creates opportunity for improved accountability around use of funding and the effectiveness of adjustments made.

Much can be done to make education settings more inclusive for autistic students

Autistic students should have access to an education system that provides an inclusive culture and a multi-faceted, individualised, needs based approach to learning that is tailored to their strengths and unique learning styles. Our survey respondents reported the following as helpful in supporting them to engage with learning:

- Educators who understand autism
- Transitions support
- Access to mentoring
- Assistance with planning/managing the study workload
- Inclusive practices (e.g. chill out spaces, supporting needs for visual/aural input)
- Assistance in communicating with facilitators/peers
- Assistance with physical access to study spaces
- Having an Individualised Inclusion Plan and meeting with teaching staff to discuss the Plan
- Having a contact person for queries about enrolment and institutional processes
- Support with academic skills development
- Social support
- Assistance with accessing financial supports.

"...it would have been extremely helpful to have a dedicated autism department on campus (and on all the campuses), where students could freely access face-to-face specific help, workshops, groups, peer mentoring and private support for their autism, which I feel would also help to lower the stigma..."

Although not widespread, or at scale, there are some promising examples of inclusive practices. The DSE webpage captures exemplar case studies, some of which relate to autistic students in early learning, schools and post-secondary environments.¹⁷ Common themes in these case studies are reflective of what our survey respondents identified as being helpful.

¹⁶ Australian Government, Department of Education, Skills and Employment. *The Disability Standards for Education, 2005*. Available at: <https://www.education.gov.au/disability-standards-education-2005>

¹⁷ Case studies are available at: <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/40601>

A stand-out example (profiled below) that we suggest exploring is the Australian Catholic University's Autism Inclusion Program.

Australian Catholic University – helping autistic students reach their potential

ACU launched the Autism Inclusion Program on its Melbourne and Ballarat campuses in 2020. The Program will be rolled out across all campuses in 2021. This comprehensive offer seeks to both work individually with students through academic, social and wellbeing supports while also addressing structural barriers to inclusion. The Program is designed to be embedded in the activities of the university, with strong cross-unit collaboration. Core elements include:

- Access to comprehensive information for (prospective) autistic students
- Working with schools to support transition (including presentations at Future Students events)
- Peer mentoring program, including ongoing PD for mentors
- Academic skills workshops
- Education Inclusion Plans
- Professional Development for teaching and administrative staff
- Resource library
- Environmental audits and adjustments
- Low-sensory room on campus (Melbourne room being refurbished, Ballarat room identified for refurbishment)
- Sensory maps (being developed by OT placement students)
- Social events (initially online due to Covid)
- Webpage: <https://www.acu.edu.au/student-life/student-services/autism-at-acu>
- Student portal page: <https://www.studentportal.acu.edu.au/acuinfo/ss/autism-at-acu>

Development and implementation of the program is being led by autistic staff and students. The Program's Steering Committee includes representatives of key ACU portfolios. An Advisory Group includes current and former autistic students and academics from ACU and other universities.

Recommendations: Education & Training

1. Overhaul the National Disability Standards to positively reframe inclusive education as a right, strengthen protections, and create accountabilities in the education system for progressively improve key inclusion metrics.
2. Expand targeted measures to increase participation of autistic children in early learning programs.
3. Upscale professional development on autism for educators, education support staff and leaders - in early learning, schools and post-secondary settings. Investigate embedding requirements to undertake autism training in educator standards and registration processes.
4. Increase accountability and transparency around how disability funding is used and the outcomes of students receiving it.
5. Improve transitional support for young autistic people to explore and navigate vocational options. Implement the recommendation from the Shergold Review into Senior Secondary Pathways that all senior secondary students with disability have access to work experience and have an individual post-school transition plan in place prior to leaving school.
6. Incentivise programs and strategies by vocational and higher education providers to bridge the gap for autistic people in receiving post-school qualification. Set targets for autistic people to take up opportunities – such as free TAFE and the new JobTrainer initiative

Lifting employment outcomes for autistic people must be a priority

Autistic people want to work and have much to offer

Autistic people aspire to work. Of our survey respondents who are not in paid employment, well over half indicated they would like to be employed.

There is strong evidence that autistic people can bring great strengths and capabilities to the workforce, and make skilful, reliable and loyal employees. Indeed, there is a sound business case for neuro-diverse workplaces, which can deliver competitive-advantages including productivity gains, quality improvement, boosts in innovative capabilities, increases in employee engagement and reputational enhancement.¹⁸

More than ever, Australia needs to unleash its latent under-utilised potential to drive and sustain economic and social recovery. There is high aspiration and huge untapped talent in the autistic community. If harnessed, it will contribute to strengthening Australia's recovery, productive capacity and community resilience.

Employment outcomes for autistic people are inexcusably poor

The most recent ABS statistics on autistic employment are from 2018. Despite Australia's strong economic growth at that time, unemployment among autistic people was a staggering 34.1% - more than three times the rate for all people with disability and almost eight times the rate of people without disability at the time.¹⁹

This will almost certainly be worse in the current environment.

Labour force participation among autistic people was just 38%, well short of all people with disability (53.4%) and less than half that of people without disability (84.1%). The employment rate was very low at 27.3%.

Under-employment and under-utilisation of skills is widespread, and many autistic people work in Australian Disability Enterprises.

"Working in a disability enterprise has been ok. He has the supports and some understanding of his autism. However it is repetitive work with little stimulation and I know he is capable of so much more if we could find the right environment. Also, the system of a disability enterprise is very unfair monetarily...they only pay the employees \$3-4 per hour."

Poor employment outcomes negatively impact other areas of life

Employment status has been shown to significantly impact mental health, wellbeing, economic security, social and community connections. The employment status of parents can also impact the development and educational attainment of children.

¹⁸ Harvard Business Review, 2017. *Neurodiversity as a Competitive Advantage*. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2017/05/neurodiversity-as-a-competitive-advantage>

¹⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018. *4430.0 Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings 2018*. Available at:

<https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4430.0Main%20Features102018?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4430.0&issue=2018&num=&view=>

Autistic people face a range of barriers to employment

Our working age survey respondents not in paid employment reported the following reasons

Main reasons for not having a paid job	Autistic adult [n=350]*		Parent/carer of autistic adult [n=268]*	
	n	%	n	%
Lack of understanding of autism from potential employers	133	38.0	109	40.7
Lack of support available to find a job (e.g. lack of knowledge about what jobs are available or how to get them)	117	33.4	102	38.1
Lack of support available to help me get to and support me in a job	108	30.9	102	38.1
Unable to attend or perform well in interviews due to my autism/anxiety	125	35.7	115	42.9
Don't know what I/they would like to do	67	19.1	68	25.4
Can't find the right job	94	26.9	81	30.2
Difficulty preparing a job application / job applications have not been successful	100	28.6	60	22.4
Illness / poor health prevents me / them from seeking employment	123	35.1	60	22.4
Not interested in working	18	5.1	19	7.1
Other (SPECIFY)	161	46.0	107	39.9
None (EXCLUSIVE)	2	0.6	0	0.0
Unsure (EXCLUSIVE)	2	0.6	7	2.6
Prefer not to say (EXCLUSIVE)	4	1.1	1	0.4

Autistic people currently encounter a range of barriers when seeking to enter and remain in the workforce. Key barriers include:

Relatively low educational attainment rates and poor translation of qualifications into employment

The vast majority of jobs growth is in occupations that require post-school qualifications (either VET or higher education).²⁰ Yet too many autistic people are not attaining the education and qualifications needed to support economic participation.²¹

But for those who do complete further or higher education, many are not achieving the employment outcomes that would usually flow from their qualification. Research by Aspect found a third of autistic people with Bachelor's degrees are unemployed – which represents significant productive capacity that is going unutilised.²²

Negative perceptions about autistic people by employers

Persistent misbeliefs and common myths stymie the efforts of autistic job seekers, with many employers believing autistic people will be less capable, or that it will be burdensome or costly to

²⁰ Australian Government, 2018. *Australian Jobs Report*. Available at: <https://australianjobs.employment.gov.au/jobs-and-training/education-and-employment>

²¹ Ibid

²² Autism Spectrum Australia, 2013. *We Belong: The experiences, aspirations and needs of adults with Asperger's disorder and high functioning autism*. Available at: https://www.autismspectrum.org.au/uploads/documents/Research/Autism_Spectrum_WE_BELONG_Research_Report-FINAL_LR_R.pdf

provide any required assistance, modifications or adjustments. Of our autistic adult survey respondents who were currently or previously employed, less than a third (30.4%) had told their employer that they are autistic. The most common reasons for not disclosure were concerns that they would be judged negatively and/or lose the job or have their hours reduced.

“I am an intelligent, articulate, pedantic, passionate person. Yet, not a single employer would give me a chance. Not in my teens, not my 20s and not my 30s. I gave up. Taking a chance on any person who appears to have the drive and ability to do a job should be enough, despite their obstacles (and if anything the fact they are striving to overcome and deal with their obstacles and have been for decades, should demonstrate the gusto of the person, which is always overlooked).”

Lack of employment services tailored to the needs of autistic jobseekers

Autistic jobseekers are generally not faring well through the Disability Employment Services and Jobactive programs. DES have no requirements for training their staff in autism and achieve low rates of successful work placements for autistic jobseekers.²³

Our survey results showed high proportions of autistic people without work identified a lack of available help to find and keep a job.

“Disappointed in understanding and inconsistency of disability support agencies. High turnover of staff, not enough time support given. Not enough choice in agencies. Some won’t even get back to you after several attempts to contact them. Feel like they’re in it for the funding not the promises they advertise.”

“Employment agencies need to be better equipped to understand people with autism.”

While there are some promising small-scale bespoke initiatives – such as DXC Dandelion, Xceptional, Specialisterne’s programs with a handful of public sector agencies and private employers (e.g. IBM, Westpac) – these are of micro scale and are few and far between.

Recruitment processes that effectively eliminate autistic candidates

Recruitment processes are one of the largest barriers to employment. Difficulties with job application processes, including performing well in interviews was a common issue for our survey respondents seeking work.

“Writing my CV, answering the selection criteria and the interview. My brain especially doesn’t function well in interview situations - my mind goes blank, I can’t remember how to say some things, I stumble over my words and sometimes stutter, I don’t know where to look... I have difficulty interpreting their questions and figuring out what they’re looking for in an answer ... I have difficulty not stimming during interviews and have to have great control over my face to not indicate all the turmoil and confusion going on inside my head.”

Barriers to employment leave many autistic people with substantial gaps in their CV’s, which in turn makes it harder to get shortlisted for a job.

Lack of flexibility in workplaces to make adjustments to support autistic employees.

Of our autistic adult survey respondents who had disclosed their diagnosis to their employer, the most common response to the question of what adjustments had been made was none (31.8%).

²³ Australian Government, 2017. *Disability employment services – Outcome rates by disability type*. Available at: <https://lmip.gov.au/default.aspx?LMIP/Downloads/DisabilityEmploymentServicesData/DESOutcomeRatesbyDisabilityType>

Less than one in ten reported that adjustments had been made to the sensory environment, and fewer still reported information had been provided to others in the workplace on how to support them at work. More common adjustments included flexible hours, providing a set work routine, avoiding changes and adapting communication methods to match preferences.

“All kinds of 'normal' stuff is MUCH harder when you have sensory processing issues, for me an open plan office with fluro lights is like trying to work in a disco. A desk that is also near the lunchroom has actually brought me to panicky tears just from the noise. "Team building" activities often directly make you feel more isolated and different and are often even more anxiety producing.”

“I wish the mantra ‘bring your whole self to work’ applied to us. We’re welcome as long as we act like everyone else.”

Real gains are possible in autistic employment

Common themes identified in research and reinforced by our survey around what helps autistic people to secure and sustain work include:

- Tailored pre-employment and in-work support
- Access to volunteer and work experience opportunities
- More support from employment agencies – including writing CVs (and where necessary post-placement support)
- Autism friendly recruitment processes – including clarity of role and adjustments to the application process
- Employers to have a better understanding of autism
- A commitment to inclusive employment practices
- Training and empathy of employers and co-workers
- A mentor, support person or advocate within the workplace
- Better understanding of sensory issues and sensory accommodation
- Flexibility with participation in work social event
- Proper enforcement of anti-discrimination laws.

Autistic people need to benefit from initiatives aimed at increasing employment for people with disability

There are a number of promising initiatives being driven by Australian governments to support employment of people with disability. However, given autistic people fare so poorly in employment vis-à-vis people with disability more generally, there is considerable risk that, without targeted measures, autistic people will not share equitably in the benefits of these initiatives.

NDIS Participants Employment Strategy:

The NDIS Participants Employment Strategy includes targets to increase the proportion of NDIS participants in paid employment (from 24% to 30% by 2025) and incrementally increase the proportion of participants with training and employment goals.

Critically, the Strategy commits to developing and delivering a specific response to employment challenges for autistic participants (along with other cohorts experiencing poor employment

outcomes) and to publish annual employment results including data split by industry, disability type and age.²⁴

The Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) Investment Strategy includes an economic participation strand which can support employment connections, employer inclusiveness and self-employment. It is critical some of this funding is directed to autism specific initiatives, and that there is transparency in its allocation.

Additionally, the NDIA and Partners in the Community are required to employ a quota of people with disability in their workforce.

Public sector disability employment targets:

Public sector disability employment targets have recently been introduced in some states (e.g. Victoria has a target of 6% by 2020 rising to 12% by 2025),²⁵ and nationally (7% employment target for people with disability across the Australian Public Service by 2025) will open up new opportunities. Targeted measures are needed to ensure autistic jobseekers are well placed to take up and successfully sustain these opportunities.

There are a handful of small public sector autism employment programs – such as the RISE program in the Victorian Department of Health & Human Services (profiled below) – which can inform broader autism accessible employment approaches across Australia’s public sectors.

RISE – a win-win for autistic recruits and the Victorian Government

In 2017, the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) launched the RISE program. It created career opportunities for autistic people in records management.

Initially designed with Specialisterne, the program includes pre-selection and training and assessment programs to prepare recruits for the job; training for managers and co-workers; in-work and career development support. DHHS has recently taken the lead in recruitment onboarding and ongoing support of RISE participants. There is no interview process. Instead, potential recruits can take part in a discovery day and a paid two-week internship. For those that find the work a good fit, a four-week paid assessment period follows before a formal offer of employment. La Trobe University’s pilot study provides a detailed account of the model.²⁶ The program has won a Tech Diversity award.

Preliminary assessments indicate RISE team has a lower error rate in data entry than the industry standard.

To date, RISE has been a success, with 20 recruits across successive intakes. There has been high retention, with most remaining in their roles. Some have been seconded into roles elsewhere in the VPS, including through a purpose-built opportunity to try working with the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning in digital mapping. There are moves to replicate the RISE model in other Departments.

²⁴ NDIA, 2019. *NDIS Participant Employment Strategy*. Available at: <https://www.ndis.gov.au/about-us/strategies/participant-employment-strategy>

²⁵ Victorian Government, 2018. *Victorian Public Sector Disability Employment Action Plan 2018-2025*. Available at: <https://vpssc.vic.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Getting-to-work.pdf>

²⁶ Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre, 2019. *The Rise@DHHS autism hiring program: Examining the impact on the individual and their workplace*. Available at: <http://otarc.blogs.latrobe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Rise@DHHS-Autism-Employment-Industry-Report-by-La-Trobe-Uni-2019-1.pdf>

DHHS are also initiating a stream for autistic trainees through the Youth Employment Scheme (YES) scheme to create a pathway for autistic young people.

Social procurement measures:

A number of state governments have introduced social procurement measures that require generation of employment opportunities for marginalised jobseekers by contractors delivering publically funded projects of significant scale. Purchasing arrangement that preference social enterprises – including those hiring people with disability – have also been introduced in some jurisdictions.

Other than the Indigenous Opportunity Policy, the Australian Government has no social procurement measures to ensure marginalised jobseekers enjoy opportunities flowing from government purchasing and contracts with external providers.

National Disability Employment Strategy:

We welcome work underway in DSS to develop a National Disability Employment Strategy. The relatively poor outcomes for autistic people demand the need for an autism focussed response within this Strategy.

Bold new employment measures for autistic people are needed to ensure employment outcomes do not go backwards in the pandemic

The Federal Government allocated \$2million (over 3 years 2019-2022) to autism specific employment initiatives to implement its 2019 election commitment. Some of this funding has gone to Specialisterne²⁷ to train and support businesses and recruitment agencies to become autism-competent; and some is supporting continuation of the successful IT focussed DXC Dandelion Program.²⁸

While this funding is welcome, the scale is insufficient to markedly shift the dial on employment outcome for autistic people. Upskilling Disability Employment Service providers in how to better meet the needs of autistic job seekers is pivotal to achieving outcomes at scale. LaTrobe University are undertaking a trial on this (with NDIS ILC funding).

In the COVID and pandemic recovery economy, with high unemployment across the board, those with existing labour market disadvantage will fare worst. Without bold measures, Australia's appalling employment outcomes for autistic people will get worse.

Job creation schemes with very deep subsidies are anticipated to be a feature of the recovery landscape. A large scale autism employment program – preferencing employers with inclusive practices – ought to be included as an element of this.

An autism employment summit is a potential means of engaging employers with autistic workers and job seekers

As Australia grapples with how to create jobs and get people into work following the pandemic, it is timely to identify tangible measures to ensure autistic jobseekers are not left further behind.

The Alliance recommends supporting a National Autism Employment Summit in early 2021. Building on previous Autism at Work events, it could bring together a broader range of stakeholders with the

²⁷ Media release from Sen. The Hon Ann Ruston, available at: <https://ministers.dss.gov.au/media-releases/5891>

²⁸ Additional information available here: <https://www.dxc.technology/au/ahp/142235-the-dxc-dandelion-program>

aim of delivering practical change and tangible models for employers to have a successful experience of hiring autistic people. The summit would include employers; TAFE; autistic people of all capability including those with intellectual disabilities; autistic employment assistance programs, service providers, community organisations; researchers and governments.

Recommendations: Employment

7. Include specific measures for autistic jobseekers within public sector employment initiatives including the NDIS Participant Employment Strategy, public sector disability employment targets, social procurement policies and the upcoming National Disability Employment Strategy.
8. Establish a federal social procurement framework requiring Australian Government contractors to deliver training and employment opportunities for marginalized jobseekers – including autistic people. A Federal purchasing strategy that preferences social enterprises should accompany this.
9. Expand demonstration projects to strengthen the evidence base on effective and efficient models that support the sustained employment of autistic people. Use these to inform systemic reforms to Disability Employment Services and Jobactive.
10. Include an autistic employment stream as part of a COVID-19 job creation schemes– providing deep wage subsidies, preferencing employers who can demonstrate inclusive practices.
11. Convene a wide-ranging autism employment summit, co-produced with autistic people, that brings together employers; TAFE; autistic people; autistic employment assistance programs, community organisations; researchers and governments to identify measures to enable autistic people to find and maintain work as Australia recovers from the pandemic.