

## Australian Autism Alliance

# Submission to The Employment White Paper (the White Paper)

### ***Unleashing the skills, talent and opportunity of Australia's autistic community***

30 November 2022

The Australian Autism Alliance (Alliance) is focussed on autistic people and their families and has strong interests in matters that affect their employment. Following is a brief submission that covers the following scope of the Terms of Reference:

- 2.1 Building a sustainable care economy in the context of an ageing population and other drivers of demand for care services.
- 5.2 Improving labour market outcomes for those who face challenges in employment, including First Nations people, those who live in rural and remote areas, younger and older Australians, people with disability, and those who may experience discrimination.
- 5.3 Skills, education and training, upskilling and reskilling, including in transitioning sectors and regions.
- 6.0 The role of collaborative partnerships between governments, industry, unions, civil society groups and communities, including place-based approaches.

### **About the Australian Autism Alliance**

[www.australianautismalliance.org.au](http://www.australianautismalliance.org.au)

The Alliance aims to provide 'One United Voice for Autism'. The Alliance was established in 2016 and aims to improve the life chances of autistic people and facilitate collaboration within the autism community. Operating as a cohesive network of organisations with a diverse focus on autism, we have a national reach that brings together key autism organisations representing and led by autistic people, advocacy groups, peak bodies, service providers, and researchers. We reach over half a million people through our communication channels and provide support to people with autism across the lifespan. Most importantly, our work is informed by autistic people and their families and carers.



Supporter



## **There is a high prevalence of autism in Australia:**

In 2018, the ABS reported that 1.3% of males, 0.4% of females and 3.2% of children aged 5–14 years have an autism diagnosis. It reported that the proportion of autistic Australians with a severe or profound disability was 68.9%. While these figures are indicative, there is some evidence that autism in the Australian community may be higher (particularly among adults and women and girls).

We await the next ABS SDAC, due next year, to see how many autistic Australians there are now, and their outcomes in education, employment, etc.

## **2.1 Building a sustainable care economy in the context of an ageing population and other drivers of demand for care services.**

Modelling<sup>1</sup> suggests ...

that informal carers of people with intellectual disability and/or ASD in Australia had aggregated lost income of AU\$310 million, lost taxation of AU\$100 million and increased welfare payments of AU\$204 million in 2015. These are projected to increase to AU\$432 million, AU\$129 million and AU\$254 million for income, taxation, and welfare respectively by 2030.

### **For context:**

Mothers are frequently required to leave their work to collect their child from school when the child is suspended or expelled for reacting to being bullied. [Autistic children are much more likely to be bullied](#); and when they are they are often blamed and mistreated for their consequent behaviour. This can lead to school refusal and/or home-schooling. And the mother is unable to work.

Even if the mother can continue working, the imposition on her career is substantial. She works reduced hours, is considered less reliable, and has fewer opportunities and promotions. Callander & Lindsay's (2018) abstract<sup>2</sup>, an Australian research paper, says:

Parental employment is a significant factor in ensuring financial ability to access care for children with autism spectrum disorder. This article aimed to identify the influence of autism spectrum disorder on parental employment and whether childcare access may effect labour force participation using the *Longitudinal Survey of Australian Children*, with 12 years of follow-up data (2004–2015). Parental employment when the child was aged between 0 and 11 years was assessed. A significantly larger percentage of parents whose children had autism spectrum disorder were *not* in the labour force when their child was aged between 2–3 and 10–11 years. However, between the ages of 2 and 5 years, these differences were not significant after accounting for maternal and paternal age, education attainment, marital status and mother labour force status prior to birth.

Childcare access did not moderate the relationship between autism spectrum disorder and maternal labour force participation. Once children were of schooling age, mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder had up to two times the odds of being not in the

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<sup>1</sup> Deborah Schofield, D., Zeppel M.J.B., et. al. (2019) *Intellectual disability and autism: socioeconomic impacts of informal caring, projected to 2030*, BJP 215, 654–660. doi: 10.1192/bjp.2019.204.

<sup>2</sup> Callander EJ, Lindsay DB. *The impact of childhood autism spectrum disorder on parent's labour force participation: Can parents be expected to be able to re-join the labour force?* Autism. 2018;22(5):542-548. doi:[10.1177/1362361316688331](https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361316688331)

labour force compared to other mothers, after adjusting for confounders. Evaluations of new interventions for children with autism spectrum disorder should consider how the proposed service impacts on the labour force participation of parents of children with autism spectrum disorder, particularly when the children are of schooling age.

The increased number of school-age autistic children is not matched by increased services to meet their needs. There are few discernible efforts at state/territory to recognise and develop the required services and workforce. Parents/carers are expected to put autistic children in mainstream schools and out-of-school care, settings that lacked skilled staff or adequate resources.

So, families – typically mothers – are required to provide the support safety net for their autistic child. Many parents of autistic children must work reduced hours because they need to provide care for their autistic child. Or they are often required to collect their child early from school, or from childcare, because the settings cannot support the child when the child is distressed.

High rates of suspensions and exclusions for autistic students 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.

In a national survey with over 3000 respondents that the Australian Autism Alliance commissioned in 2020 undertaken by the ACU Engagement (ACU 2020 Survey) more than one-third of autistic adults (42.1%) and about a third of parents/carers (31.5%) have lost their job due to their or the person they care for's autism.

## **5.2 Improving labour market outcomes for those who face challenges in employment, including First Nations people, those who live in rural and remote areas, younger and older Australians, people with disability, and those who may experience discrimination**

Employment outcomes for autistic people are abysmal. Autistic people are less likely to be employed than people with disability generally, and the general employment rate for Australians with disability is unacceptable. A survey conducted by the Autistic Self Advocacy Network AUNZ shows that employment support is the second highest priority for autistic people and autistic parents of autistic children. Autistic people aspire to work. Of the ACU 2020 Survey respondents who are not in paid employment, well over half indicated they would like to be employed.

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<sup>3</sup>. 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%. Employment status has been shown to significantly impact mental health, wellbeing, economic security, social and community

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<sup>3</sup> 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=Summy&prodno=4430.0&issue=2018&num=&view=36>

connections. The employment status of parents can also impact the development and educational attainment of children.

People in regional and remote settings report limited access to disability services and supports. Consequently, families and carers carry an increased burden of support for people in their care. Inevitably, the caring burden impacts adversely on work and employment.

### **Autistic people face a range of barriers to employment**

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. 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.<sup>4</sup>
- 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 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.
- 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.<sup>5</sup> Our ACU 2020 survey results showed high proportions of autistic people without work identified a lack of available help to find and keep a job.
- 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. Difficulties with job application processes, including performing well in interviews was a common issue for our survey respondents
- 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 (ACU 2020) respondents who had disclosed their diagnosis to their

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<sup>4</sup> 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\\_ReportFINAL\\_LR\\_R.pdf](https://www.autismspectrum.org.au/uploads/documents/Research/Autism_Spectrum_WE_BELONG_Research_ReportFINAL_LR_R.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Australian Government, 2017. Disability employment services – Outcome rates by disability type. Available at: <https://lmip.gov.au/default.aspx?LMIP/Downloads/DisabilityEmploymentServicesData/DESOutcomeRatesbyDisabilityType>

employer, the most common response to the question of what adjustments had been made was none (31.8%).

- 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

### **Areas of Opportunity**

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.

Autistic people want to work and have much to offer. Of our survey respondents (ACU 2020) 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<sup>6</sup>.

### **5.3 Skills, education and training, upskilling and reskilling, including in transitioning sectors and regions.**

Education is pivotal to improving life chances and equipping autistic people to meet Australia's contemporary and future workforce needs. There is huge potential to lift the educational attainment of autistic people through much higher rates of school, VET and university completions.

Raising expectations about the potential of autistic students, backed by measures to enable their participation demands concerted national action. Our education systems must be held to account for doing better by autistic learners.

Specific common themes identified in research and reinforced by the Alliance ACU 2020 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 postplacement 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

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<sup>6</sup> Harvard Business Review, 2017. Neurodiversity as a Competitive Advantage. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2017/05/neurodiversity-as-a-competitive-advantage>

- 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.

## **6.0 The role of collaborative partnerships between governments, industry, unions, civil society groups and communities, including place-based approaches.**

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.

Hence:

1. Include specific measures for autistic jobseekers within public sector employment initiatives including the NDIS Participant Employment Strategy<sup>7</sup>, public sector disability employment targets, social procurement policies and the National Disability Employment Strategy.
2. 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.
3. Expand demonstration projects to strengthen the evidence base on effective and efficient models that support the sustained employment of autistic people. Such projects are RISE (Victoria), Autism EmployABLE (Autism Queensland) and Integrated Employment Success Tool (Autism CRC). Use these to inform systemic reforms to Disability Employment Services and Jobactive.
4. Include an autistic employment stream as part of any job initiative schemes– providing deep wage subsidies and preferencing employers who can demonstrate inclusive practices.

Furthermore, it was recommended in the Senate Inquiry on Autism final report (March 2022), that a National Autism Employment Framework be agreed under the auspices of the National Autism Strategy. The framework should identify actions to:

- promote the benefits of hiring autistic people to governments and business;
- further establish governments as employers of choice;
- incentivise private sector employment;
- encourage the expansion of both ICT and non-ICT autism-focused employment programs;
- support self-employment options for autistic people;
- improve information for autistic job seekers about available supports and DES providers with autism experience; and
- to improve autism-related education, training and resources for DES providers and employers (building on existing resources where available).

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<sup>7</sup> NDIA, 2019. NDIS Participant Employment Strategy. Available at: <https://www.ndis.gov.au/aboutus/strategies/participant-employment-strategy>

It was recommended the framework should also be compatible with the Employ My Ability strategy and should help inform the new Disability Employment Support (DES) Model being developed by the Department of Social Services for implementation in 2023.

The committee recommended that the Department of Social Services:

- a. ensure that all monitoring and evaluation activities related to the Employ My Ability strategy and the new Disability Employment Support Model allow for disaggregation by disability type, including autism;
- b. incorporate into the design of the new Disability Employment Support Model:
  - o relevant elements of the National Autism Employment Framework; and
  - o lessons from autism-specific employment programs about what works in relation to achieving long-term employment outcomes for autistic people.

The above initiatives will have such a significant positive multiplier effect, in terms of economic and social contribution, when invested and executed with measurable accountability in place.

We thank you for the opportunity to respond and look forward to the white paper being published.

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