



Informing the National Autism Strategy

Due 30 April

To the Autism CRC

Re: ADCET submission Informing the National Autism Strategy

ADCET (Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training) is Australia's leading resource for disability practitioners, educators and students (and their families) to navigate post-secondary education and training opportunities.

ADCET welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this important consultation to inform the National Autism Strategy

Please do not hesitate to contact us for any further detail, clarification or questions.

Regards

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About ADCET

ADCET (Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training) provides national leadership in the inclusion of people with disability in tertiary education through providing information and professional development for disability practitioners, educators and support staff.

Our approach is sector-led drawing on good practice, research and the lived experience of people with disability to develop resources, content and projects of national significance which drive positive change in the tertiary education sector (Higher Education and VET).

Our projects, activities and resources are highly strategic, building capacity within and across the tertiary education sector to enable full access, participation, retention and success of students with disability. ADCET has been working with the tertiary education sectors for more than 20 years.

ADCET is primarily focused on people with disability but recognises the intersectionality of people with disability with other identities including Aboriginality, gender diversity, socio-economic and geographic dimensions which can further impact access and participation in tertiary education.

ADCET has just celebrated 20 years in the tertiary education sector and has high levels of [impact and engagement](#). This includes over 1.1 million website engagements annually; 33,000 enrolments in Disability Awareness eLearning; and 3,000 social media and newsletter subscribers.

ADCET is funded through the *Higher Education Disability Support Program (HEDSP)* within the [Higher Education Support \(Other Grants\) Guidelines 2022](#). Under this legislation (Part 3, Division 2, 42) ADCET has two key program objectives:

- specified as a program for the purpose of promoting equality of opportunity in higher education
- provides information, advice, and online resources (including in a form able to be downloaded and used) through a website, hosted by a provider, to disability practitioners, teachers, and students to promote inclusive teaching and learning practices for students with disability.

Questions on Education

Question 1. What are three problems that Autistic people experience with education?

The Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training we are primarily focussed on students with disability in tertiary education (Higher Education and VET) as well as transitions from high school to tertiary study. Some of the key barriers for Autistic people, and people with disability more broadly in access, participation and success in tertiary education include:

- **poor transition from high school to tertiary education.** This includes a culture of low expectations at schooling level about opportunities for Autistic people to pursue tertiary education
- **poor support for Autistic people in preparing for tertiary education** – this includes both school-leavers and adults who have been away from study for a period of time
- **lack of understanding of the impacts of Autism on learning and appropriate inclusive teaching, learning, support and design solutions** which support access, participation, retention and success¹. For example, ad hoc adoption of inclusive teaching strategies such as Universal Design for Learning in the tertiary education system is low compared with the schooling sector. In addition, tertiary providers do not have appropriate resources in place to address the cultural, physical and digital barriers to tertiary education e.g., install inclusive design solutions within the built environment to make accessible places for Autistic people to navigate the physical world; support to implement appropriate and accessible ICT through good [ICT procurement](#); and better disability responsiveness training for staff.
- **insufficient funding to the tertiary education sector** to provide appropriate support measures to people with a disability more broadly, and specifically the needs of Autistic people. This includes building capacity in the workforce around disability responsiveness, inclusive teaching strategies, addressing physical and digital barriers, and supporting graduate success.

Question 2. What do you think is causing these problems?

Tertiary education providers are not keeping pace in terms of inclusive strategies compared with the increase in the number of Autistic people. The Australian Institute of Health and Wellbeing (AIHW) suggests that there has been a considerable increase in the number of Autistic people since 2009². The most recent ABS survey³ (2019) suggests that there are now just over 200,000 Autistic people in Australia – a rise of 25% since the last survey in 2015. People diagnosed with Autism is also the largest primary category of disability in the NDIS⁴.

Furthermore, while tertiary providers are required to report on students with disability it is reliant on self-disclosure and the disability categories are not nuanced enough about Autistic people. The collection process only changed in 2020⁵ and some changes to disability categories was meant to provide better understanding of the types of disability. However, it is not nuanced enough to capture accurate data on Autistic people. For

¹ [Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Higher Education - NCSEHE](#)

² [Autism in Australia, Autism - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(aihw.gov.au\)](#)

³ [Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers \(SDAC\) 2019](#)

⁴ NDIS, [Archived Quarterly Reports 2019-20](#). Accessed at <https://www.ndis.gov.au/about-us/publications/quarterly-reports/archived-quarterly-reports-2019-20#second-quarter-2019-20-q2>

⁵ [About Tertiary Collection of Student Information](#)

example, Autism is include under the category of 'Neurological Conditions' which also includes other conditions such as epilepsy, Alzheimer's disease, multiple sclerosis, ADHD or brain tumours. Evidence from Australia and overseas indicates that there are increasing numbers of students with Autism in the higher education sector⁶. **The prevalence of Autism means it should have its own category.**

Despite this increase in enrolments students with disability retention and success rates continue to be lower than people without disability⁷.

For Autistic people, some key barriers to education include:

- **low expectations of people with disability including a lack of understanding about the strengths and impacts of Autism on learning and in navigating tertiary education.** The Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) Senate Select Committee on Autism stated that 70% of students with disability responding to their survey reported that they were not encouraged to complete or to choose subjects that would lead to a good ATAR score for higher education⁸. ABS data indicates that people with ASD are less likely than others to complete an educational qualification beyond school. Only 8.1% have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 16.1% of those with a disability and 31.2% of those without disability⁹. Up to 25% of students with ASD withdraw from higher education before completion¹⁰. They are also less likely to hold an Advanced Diploma, Diploma or Certificate III or IV compared to people with disability and people who do not have a disability⁶.

In addition, suitable transition in and ongoing support strategies across the student's lifecycle which address the specific needs of Autistic people are required. For example, student's success is influenced by the connections they form during their studies, but Autistic students may experience significant barriers to forming and maintaining those connections. The isolation, and lack of places and spaces that are identified as neurodivergent-friendly, then has flow on effects to mental health, persistence, and overall success. This is especially true where the student's executive functioning is impacted and ongoing support with planning and problem solving is needed.

- **lack of understanding by tertiary education providers of legislative responsibilities** around the *Disability Discrimination Act* and the *Disability Standards for Education (DSE)* and appropriate reasonable adjustments leading to discrimination and denial of reasonable adjustments. The Australian Institute for Health and Wellbeing (AIHW) has shown that 1 in 4 people with disability experience discrimination compared with 1 in 6 people without disability¹¹ and grounds include access to buildings and facilities, public transport, education and employment.
- **lack of transition support between high school and tertiary education – including supporting students with Autism to disclose and self-advocate.** This includes schooling staff, recruitment and widening participation staff at tertiary education providers and NDIS staff. In particular the NDIS has had a limited focus on proactively support students with disability to pursue tertiary education and are often unsure or

⁶ Owen, C., McCann D., Rayner, C., Devreux, C., Sheehan, F., & L Quarmby (2016) [Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Higher Education](#)

⁷ [Current HE Data Analysis - ADCET](#)

⁸ [CYDA Senate Select Committee on Autism response](#)

⁹ [Autism in Australia in Disability, Aging and Carers, Australia \(2019\) ABS](#)

¹⁰ [Autism Spectrum Australia \(2012\) We Belong: Investigating the experiences, aspirations and needs of adults with Asperger's disorder and high functioning autism.](#)

¹¹ [People with disability in Australia 2019: in brief, How many experience discrimination? \(aihw.gov.au\)](#)

unskilled at incorporating meaningful planning goals which assist students with disability to consider post-secondary study.

- **lack of consistency of support across education sectors.** There is no equivalent process to the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) for students with disability in schooling in the tertiary education sector which provides tertiary education providers with information on previous reasonable adjustments provided to students
- **funding differences between high school and tertiary education.** For example, under the Higher Education Disability Support Program is only \$7.9 million per annum (indexed)¹². This equates to approximately \$104 per student¹³. This is in stark contrast to the investment being made by the Commonwealth in schooling from 2018 to 2029, where it will invest an estimated \$28.8 billion for students with disability loading. On average, funding for students with disability in schooling will grow by 5.1% each year over this period and each funded student would be allocated between \$4,704 through to \$35,350 per student¹⁴.
- **low levels of visible representative leadership from Autistic people in tertiary education,** where the concept of ‘you can’t be what you can’t see’ can be quite a disabling factor. More broadly there is also limited attention paid to disability inclusion action plans which appropriate strategies such as inclusive communication strategies which promotes Autistic people participating and succeeding in tertiary study.

Question 3. What do you think could prevent or reduce these problems?

These issues could be addressed through a national Autism strategy, sectoral reform, policy reform, capacity building and strong leadership across governments and sectors. These include:

- **better capacity building in the schooling sector about transition opportunities** for Autistic people undertaking post-secondary study or training.
- **capacity building in tertiary education workforce** around disability awareness, legislative responsibilities under the Disability Standards for Education and the Disability Discrimination Act, understanding how to develop inclusive built environments and accessible ICT procurement solutions, and professional development for teaching staff around inclusive teaching strategies
- **recommend the development of Inclusive Universal Design Campus Guidelines** as recommended by the Universities Enable’s Accord Submission¹⁵. These guidelines to apply innovative physical design solutions to the built and learning environment address issues such as sensory overload from acoustic and visual stimuli and go beyond the normative understanding of mobility and physical impairment to specifically address the needs of Autistic people and are outlined in research by Owen et al (2016)¹⁶.
- **capacity building amongst tertiary providers and organisations** charged with the recruitment and employment of people with disability including career counsellors, career services in tertiary education providers, Disability Employment Services,

¹² [2010-2023 Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program \(HEPPP\) Participation Allocations](#)

¹³ [Calculating the costs of supporting people with disability in Australian higher education - NCSEHE](#)

¹⁴ Review of the loading for students with disability 2019 – public submission. https://www.dese.gov.au/system/files/documents/document-file/2020-12/australian_government_department_of_education_0.pdf

¹⁵ [Universities Enable – Universities Accord Submission](#)

¹⁶ Owen, C, McCann D., Rayner, C., Devereaux, C., Sheehan, F., & L Quarmby (2016) [Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Higher Education](#)

specialised recruitment services, talent and recruitment services, industry and employers

- **better funding for people with disability to access into post-secondary education.** Under the Higher Education Disability Support Program higher education is only funded for \$7.9 million per annum (indexed). This equates to approximately \$104 per student. This is in stark contrast to the investment being made by the Commonwealth in schooling from 2018 to 2029, where it will invest an estimated \$28.8 billion for students with disability loading. On average, funding for students with disability in schooling will grow by 5.1% each year over this period and each funded student would be allocated between \$4,704 through to \$35,350 per student. We also recommend consideration of a separate funding stream for tertiary institutions to provide good practice specialist support programs – such as peer mentoring – for students with ASD to ensure they experience equity in tertiary education across the student lifecycle and taking into account their particular needs¹⁷
- **more nuanced collection of statistical data** about type of disability through the Tertiary Collection of Student Information (TCSI) process similar to the NCCD to allow for seamless transition of information about type of disability and reasonable adjustments between sectors.
- **better promotion of tertiary education pathways for NDIA participants.** This includes the NDIA measuring and publicly reporting on tertiary qualification levels and numbers of NDIS participants in tertiary education (with breakdowns of qualification levels). The NDIA should also actively promote tertiary education pathways in all in agency materials, including showcasing success stories of NDIS participants who have gone to VET or Higher Education and achieved positive graduate employment outcomes. For Planners and Local Area Coordinators (LACs) professional development which builds cross-sectoral cooperations between the tertiary education sector and NDIS including building an understanding of the interface between the Disability Standards for Education and the NDIS is recommended.
- **Undertake a comprehensive review of existing mentoring programs across the tertiary sector**¹⁸. There can be considerable variance between the different specialist mentoring programs provided in tertiary education providers across Australia. There is immense value in having a range of different modes and approaches, the sector as a whole could benefit from a review of the existing programs. This could involve an analysis of the differences, comparisons, and the advantages of each of the different approaches, and establish benchmarks for good practice. This could enable not only tertiary providers to adopt suitable strategies for their context but, more importantly, it could help Autistic individuals and their families make more informed choices about university selection.

Question 4. What is working well, or has worked well, for Autistic people in education?

Autistic people entering into tertiary education are successful when they are provided with the tools to succeed. This includes planning for their tertiary studies, know who they should talk to for support and understanding what is expected. Pre-tertiary programs specifically aimed at Autistic people are limited, as are programs specifically aimed at transition and success. This is partly due to funding for transition programs for first years with disability.

¹⁷ [Autism Mentoring Community of Practice submission](#) to 2020 Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005

¹⁸ *ibid*

There are examples of tertiary sector peer mentoring programs¹⁹ around the country that are demonstrating promise, and the uptake of these has increase over recent years. However, these programs are not specifically funded and are therefore at the mercy of executive leadership within institutions. Expanding these types of efforts provides Autistic people with options to connect with peers, learn and share ideas and strategies and build supportive communities within structures that are not well designed for all. In addition, comprehensive research and good practice evaluation is required in order to identify appropriate programs that could be rolled out nationally.

For over 20 years the Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training has been supporting the tertiary education sector capacity building, through professional development opportunities and engagement and resource development of national significance. Our central aim is to provide these resources to assist disability practitioners and educators to adequately support students with disability across their learning and training journey. Despite the good practice provided around the examples below, many have been one-off responses due to the funding source and objectives. Often no additional funds have been secured to review, redevelop or update these resources, or undertake monitoring and evaluation on uptake and efficacy.

Examples specifically for student with Autism include:

- eLearning package [Secondary Education - Disability Awareness](#) for schooling sector to assist students with disability to transition to secondary education (released April 2023)
- [eLearning packages](#) in *Introduction to Disability Awareness, Supporting Students in VET and Universal Design for Learning* has seen over 30,000 enrolments
- preparatory information for students with disability [Planning for Post-Secondary Education - ADCET](#) (2,632 webpage views in last 12 months)
- *How to Transition to Tertiary Education - Helpful hints for Autistic Spectrum Disorder* [How to Transition to Tertiary Education - Helpful hints for Autistic people Spectrum Disorder - ADCET](#) (1,376 webpage views in last 12 months)
- [NDIS Pre-planning toolkit](#) for Autistic people (369 webpage views in last 12 months)
- Reasonable adjustment guidelines for disability practitioners [Disability Specific Adjustments: Autism](#) (388 webpage views in last 12 months)
- [Inclusive teaching](#) strategies including Universal Design for Learning (eLearning program, community of practice, webinars and other resources) (178,568 webpage views in last 12 months and 5,484 for Universal Design for Learning sub-page)
- [Inclusive teaching: Autism](#) reasonable adjustments for educators (3,169 for Autism sub-page views in last 12 months)
- Accessible [ICT Procurement Guide](#) (launched October 2022 and housed on external page) for tertiary education providers to ensure that all ICT and digital software and hardware is fully accessible for all
- Resources to support tertiary providers to develop a [Disability Action Plan](#) (296 views in last 12 months) and [inclusive language and visual representation](#) (1,693 views in the last 12 months (a new development guide for tertiary providers is coming soon).

¹⁹ [Autism Mentoring Community of Practice submission](#) to 2020 Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005; [Autism CRC](#);

Questions on Employment

Question 1. What are three problems that Autistic people experience with employment?

There is a vast difference between the labour force participation (LFP) rates for people with disability compared to those without. In 2018 the ABS recorded the LFP rate for people with disability was 53.4% compared with 84.1% for people without disability – a gap of 30%. The gap in LFP is much narrower for people with disability who graduate from university. For example, the LFP has been around 4 – 5%. In 2022 the labour force participation for this cohort is 88.9%, compared with those without disability at 92.8% ([QILT, 2022](#)).

The VET National Student Outcomes Survey reported the percentage of students in either employment or further study after the completion of their program and there is a 11% difference between the rates for students declaring a disability and those who did not. The numbers of students in employment after completion of VET (e.g., removing the students who were in further study) showed a greater difference between those who have declared a disability and who have not, with gaps over the last 5 years varying between 20% and 26%.

Key challenges for Autistic people in employment include:

- **poor transition from high school to tertiary education in order to develop the appropriate skills and training needed for employment.** The National Skills Commission reports that 9 out of 10 jobs created in the next 5 years will require formal post-secondary credentials²⁰. Again, low expectations of people with disability, including Autistic people, means they are streamed out of the possibility and opportunities for post-secondary education resulting in limited engagement or engagement in employment which in turn impacts opportunities to improve their socioeconomic security and wellbeing. As mentioned above this results in significant gaps in labour force participation for people with disability. The gap closes the higher the qualification gained.
- **culture of low expectation of people with disability with careers and employment services.** When people with disability including Autistic people do graduate from tertiary education their employment opportunities are again limited by a culture of low expectations through Job Access services including Disability Employment Services (DES). In many cases DES providers do not understand how to appropriately place graduates with disability into employment which is related to their studies and at a salary level that is commensurate with their qualifications. Career Services within tertiary education institutions are also often ill-prepared to properly support graduates with disability and match them with recruiters/industry professionals. A 2017 survey²¹ by the National Disability Coordination Officer (NDCO) program surveyed 220 DES consultants about their experiences working with university graduates.

Almost 80% of the DES consultants reported either not knowing about, or not working with universities to directly register graduates with disability; 69% had no experience at all working in a university setting and 82% did not have a relationship with either equity or careers staff at their local university. Only 23% of consultants had a degree bringing forward a potentially low representation of lived experience of the student perspective. This survey prompted a pilot of the University Specialist Employment Partnership

²⁰ [Projecting employment to 2026 | National Skills Commission](#)

²¹ [Why USEP? Background Paper](#)

(USEP) to better support DES providers, create opportunities for linkages between DES providers and universities, and to improve employment outcomes for students. Subsequently, the TAFE Specialist Employment Partnership (TSEP) provides a similar arrangement within the VET sector.

- **poor recruitment and retention processes for people with disability in industry.** Industry does not specifically target people with disability (or rarely does) as part of their affirmative action strategies or diversity hiring practices. In fact, there are still many organisations whose recruitment processes, including digital platforms for applying and vetting processes, insistence on interviews instead of more nuanced and relevant approaches like work task trials; and standardised psychometric testing create a barrier to employment. Again, a lack of disability awareness amongst recruiters on hiring people with disability leads to indirect and direct discrimination against people with disability. This is also reinforced by small numbers of businesses who register a Disability Action Plan with the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) which indicates a commitment to disability inclusion.

The register²² includes the Disability Action Plans of 7 banks, 1 legal firm, 24 transport companies, 4 telecommunications companies, 7 utility companies, 14 healthcare organisations and 33 other businesses with a plan (not all have registered current plans). Representation for Federal, State and Local Governments with registered Disability Action Plans is high. In the education sector only 21 TAFEs (out of 59) and 34 universities (out of 43) and a number of RTOs (although many plans are out of date).

Question 2. What do you think is causing these problems?

Key issues that need to be addressed around employment outcomes for Autistic people include:

- lack of understanding by career and employment services about supporting Autistic people into employment – especially graduates with disability. This includes lack of disability awareness and responsiveness by career services provided with tertiary education providers, Disability Employment Services (DES), and Job Access services who often have a culture of low expectation and lack of understanding of graduate capabilities for graduates with disability
- lack of understanding about the strengths and impacts of Autistic people in employment
- lack of understanding of legislative responsibilities around the *Disability Discrimination Act* including digital and physical barriers for people with disability across the recruitment phase and making appropriate workplace adjustments. (The AIHW reported that the Australian Human Rights Commission reported more complaints about disability discrimination than on any other grounds²³)
- lack of disability awareness within organisations across a broad range of industries in order to work with people with disability resulting in direct and indirect discrimination.

Question 3. What do you think could prevent or reduce these problems?

ADCET focusses on capacity-building through its Disability Awareness eLearning packages which are available to organisations across Australia, not just tertiary education providers.

²² [Register of Disability Discrimination Act Action Plans | Australian Human Rights Commission](#)

²³ [People with disability in Australia 2019: in brief, How many experience discrimination? \(aihw.gov.au\)](#)

ADCET's [Introduction to Disability Awareness](#) - eLearning has over 30,000 registrations and 65 organisations have purchased the package to embed into their learning management system. These include NDIS, Social Services and Disability Employment Services; city and regional councils; government agencies such as Department of Environment and Water (SA) and Department of Energy and Mining (SA); and private organisations such as PWC, The Smith Family, Airservices Australia, and Pacific Hydro.

Examples of other activities that ADCET has to support students with student with Autism include:

- preparatory information for students with disability planning for employment
[Employment - ADCET](#)
- Employment programs to assist Higher Education and VET providers to enhance their capability to support people with disability in their search for graduate employment
[USEP and TSEP Toolkits - ADCET](#)
- A national Career Development Hub produced by the National Career Institute to support people with a disability into employment (coming in May).

It is important that across the whole tertiary education and transition to employment lifecycle that significant and meaningful investments are made so that Autistic people have access to a capable workforce that understands Autism, the strengths and challenges it raises for education and employment, and how to work effectively with Autistic people to empower them to achieve their education and study goals. This includes research investment into accessibility across physical, digital, learning and cultural domains e.g., innovative design solutions in the built environment to make accessible places for Autistic people to navigate the physical world; support to implement appropriate and accessible ICT through good [ICT procurement](#); Universal Design for Learning and better disability responsiveness.

Education providers and industries also need to address systemic ableism and discrimination that can occur in education and employment including unfair admissions practices, non-inclusive teaching and learning practices, failing to provide reasonable adjustments, poor graduate career development support and non-inclusive hiring practices.

Question 4. What is working well, or has worked well, for Autistic people in relation to employment?

Out of scope

Autism diagnostic services

Question 1. What are three problems that Autistic people, and their families/carers, experience with Autism diagnostic services?

Access to diagnostic services for adults (i.e., non-school leavers) with Autism going into tertiary education is especially difficult. In many cases students who suspect an Autism diagnosis may have experienced difficulties at school including no reasonable adjustments or learning interventions to assist with their learning and this may have negative impacts on their achievement.

An Autistic person with a suspected or recent diagnosis will need a formal diagnosis and assessment in order to be provided with appropriate supports at a tertiary education provider. The *Australian Longitudinal Study of Autism in Adulthood* suggests that 1 in 150 adults have Autism but conceded this is under-reported²⁴. The AIHW suggests that there has been a considerable increase in the number of Autistic people since 2009²⁵ making it harder to get timely assessment and support. The most recent ABS survey²⁶ (2019) suggests that there are now just over 200,000 Autistic people in Australia – a rise of 25% since the last survey in 2015.

School-leavers usually have better support in place as they may have already had access to diagnosis and assessment and may have had interventions and reasonable adjustments in place under the National Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) for students with disability. However, many assessments are undertaken in primary or early secondary school and an updated assessment is needed for tertiary education (usually no more than three years old).

Autistic people do not need to revisit their diagnosis – repeated revisions by medical practitioners to confirm the diagnosis of a lifelong condition is non-sensical. However, Autistic people may need an updated assessment of impact of their condition on learning. An assessment which outlines the positive and challenging elements of their condition and recommends appropriate reasonable adjustments within a tertiary education context (accounting for course level, discipline, course requirements etc) would be useful.

A strategy which allows for iterative assessment on the impact of different learning stages as part of an Autistic person's lifelong learning journey should be investigated. Having said that if tertiary study institutions had effective inclusive teaching strategies such as Universal Design for Learning embedded in their organisations, then the need for these assessments would also be reduced.

The cost of obtaining assessments suitable for tertiary education providers can be prohibitive to most adults. The cost of obtaining diagnostic reports and assessments is expensive with private practitioners charging anywhere from \$1000 to \$4000²⁷ depending on which practitioners may be involved. Limited private health care rebates or Medicare rebates are available (again depending on practitioners), and NDIS participants may be able to access assessments.

The delay in obtaining assessments suitable for tertiary education providers is also problematic, again this is due to costs, but other issues include:

²⁴ [Australian Longitudinal Study of Autism in Adulthood \(ALSAA\) | Autism CRC](#)

²⁵ [Autism in Australia, Autism - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(aihw.gov.au\)](#)

²⁶ *Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (SDAC) 2019*

²⁷ [Assessment Types – Autism Spectrum Australia \(Aspect\)](#)

- waiting times (currently between 6 to 12 months through some state-based Autism organisations) for suitably qualified practitioners²⁸ to make assessments
- geographical access to practitioners with specialised training in Autism assessment variability and quality of assessments²⁹
- suitability of the assessment for making reasonable adjustment recommendations for tertiary education learning environments.

Question 2. What do you think is causing these problems?

Diagnosis of Autism is challenging and requires a multi-tiered and holistic assessment of an individual and often involves a team of medical and/or allied health teams e.g., psychiatrist, nurse, occupational therapist, psychologist). This often team-based assessment process often takes time. Even ‘single clinician diagnostic assessments’ require some shared processes.

A National Guideline for Assessment and Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorders in Australia: Summary and Recommendations suggests better professional development for practitioners involved in referral, assessment, interventions and support for Autistic people. Assessment of Autism includes medical and allied health practitioners working in concert with disability or educational professionals and the individual to set them up for success in learning.

Better recognition of the need for health and allied health practitioners to develop a strengths-based approach to supporting Autistic people includes ongoing training and professional development. In addition, consistent implementation and monitoring of practitioners who undertake assessments is required. While a nationally consistent set of guidelines to quality assure Autism diagnosis and assessment is welcomed it has slowed the ability to obtain timely assessments – especially for adults. Consideration of the impact of an Autistic individual’s lifelong learning needs to be considered in training provider by health professionals.

The need for multiple practitioners to be involved in the process also makes seamless assessment difficult because of the diverse types of practitioners involved and the varying costs and rebates available to service users. For the 88% of existing NDIS participants already have a disability getting an assessment could be managed under their package, however, if an assessment is needed to get support from the NDIS, then the same issue of waiting lists applies.

Education providers aim for a social model of disability but still oscillate between a medical model and social model, due to resource restrictions so they still require some basic documentation of diagnosis. The medicalisation of an Autism diagnosis is less crucial than assessing the impact of Autism on an individual’s learning needs within a tertiary education environment. The key information required is what reasonable adjustments might be needed for the individual student in order to undertake their preferred type of education or training course.

This is why a childhood diagnosis is acceptable but not the assessment of the impact on learning. As Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition which can change over time, the impact on new types of learning – such as that undertaken at TAFE or University – requires up-to-date assessment. This assessment should take into account how each

²⁸ AutismCRC released [national guidelines for practitioners](#) in 2018

²⁹ [Diagnostic practices in Australia | Autism CRC](#)

individual manages their condition and the strategies they already have in place which have assisted with learning. An iterative assessment would take into account the new learning environment (e.g., course level, discipline, course requirements etc) and provide additional information on impact and potential reasonable adjustments. For an adult that has been newly diagnosed this assessment may be more involved and additional support would be needed to ensure that the individual has appropriate interventions and strategies to thrive in a new study environment.

Question 3. What do you think could prevent or reduce these problems?

Some considerations that might assist include:

- **more support to state-based Autism organisations** who provide assessments in order to reduce waiting times
- **more flexible approaches to assessment** which are iterative taking account of the individual's own strategies and insights and appropriate to the stage of study or training being undertaken
- **better rebates across the health care system** for individuals attempting to get a diagnosis and assessment
- **more access to assessment training** for medical and allied health professionals to undertake specialised training e.g., [Autism CRC eLearning program](#) or Graduate Certificate in Autism Diagnosis
- **develop training programs to expand to disability practitioners** in tertiary education to assess for the purposes of determining reasonable adjustments for Autistic people in conjunction with medical practitioners

Setting aside formal assessments however, we know that there is a considerable rise in the number of young people diagnosed with Autism and that over 77% report difficulties at their place of learning³⁰ as a major issue, so it is incumbent on educational institutions at every stage of learning to be trained in supporting Autistic people. This includes mandatory disability awareness training; targeted transition support including orientation/transition in activities, learning support, and peer mentoring; understanding obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act and the Disability Standards for Education; creating accessible physical and digital learning spaces; embedding inclusive learning strategies such as Universal Design for Learning; and better data collection on Autistic students with TCSI.

Question 4. What is working well, or has worked well, for Autistic people in relation to Autism diagnostic services?

Out of scope

³⁰ [ABS Autism in Australia in Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia \(2019\)](#)